Uncharted Places

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About the authors

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I am not a researcher of the future, therefore I cannot talk but about my own fears and hopes regarding the future of literature. My fears are fuelled by everyday reality; by the reality we create. They are, naturally, about just as many TV channels and websites being started, and just as many malls and amusement parks being opened tonight to render literature completely uninteresting by tomorrow morning for everyone else but me. Besides, everyday reality is aggravated by that peculiar lousy memory characteristic of writers, according to which in the good old times peasants were fast to get home after harvest to read a few pages of Goethe.

By all means, we have no reason to fear war; as experience has shown, the more books and authors are burnt during a war, the greater is the need for them afterwards. It is after a war, that the largest number of children are born, curiously enough most of them being boys; and publishing houses start over business sooner than tobacco companies—it is statistics purely, although my hopes are not based on this. My hopes are based on the human soul during the times, which is—against our best efforts—still the way it was, defying everyday reality, be that reality archaic or globalised, over-rationalised or anarchic. It is not quite a sane occupation, being a writer; it is the single loneliest. The astronaut comes as a close second—but an astronaut has radio connection. Sitting alone at a bureau, tinkering away with words, sentences, question marks while life is going on outside. Miners at least go underground in a group. Hermits at least allow beasts and birds to visit them. For the sake of a better sentence we sometimes order our own
children out of the room. Whereas I have yet to see a writer made happier by a better sentence, or at least more content, like a carpenter having finished a solid roof. And still. Once, when I was not the least a writer, simply writing love poems and short stories of sorrow as anyone who experienced first love and the first real sorrow; so once, when at least it seemed as if I had a choice, and therefore the question whether writing makes sense made sense, I spent many nights thinking about what would happen if, by the next morning, literature disappeared. Completely. Without a trace. High school textbooks would disappear, even the telling epitaphs, all of the literary museums and editing offices, and the prose and poetry shelves would stand empty in the libraries. Let’s say that at the same time a virus would attack and gobble up folk ballads and Dostoyevsky, John’s Revelations and Shakespeare from our nerve cells, that is there would be no evidence that literature ever existed. Maybe I was wrong but I thought nothing would happen. In fact everything would go on as it did before. There would be stock market and penicillin, iron plough and chemical fertilizer, Chanel and Red October Clothing Factory, because at that time I did not even dare to dream about a time when the Red October Clothing Factory ceases to exist. Truth is, that instead of devastating me, this conclusion comforted me. For if there is something that has, since the beginning of times existed so pointlessly yet so stubbornly, then it will continue to exist till the end of time as well.

Today I still think that I have not been very wrong, I simply became a bit more hopeful regarding the sense of writing. This hope of mine was strengthened a few days ago by C.G. Jung’s thoughts: “As single individuals, peoples and ages had their own intellectual trends and orientations. Direction means exclusion. Exclusion in turn means that such and such psychical content cannot, after all, live with us, as it does not meet the general orientation. Normal people can bear the general orientation without harm, yet those who prefer side roads and diversions cannot tread the wide road like them, and they are the first to notice what lies next to the main road, what awaits co-existence. The quasi nonconformism of the artist is a true advantage, making it possible to stay away from the wide road, pursuing one’s wishes, and finding what the others have missed without even knowing about what they missed.” I could say that the existence of literature is a seemingly pointless consequence of the human psyche, bringing joy and causing trouble all the time, exactly like love. And it is common knowledge about the human psyche that is has not changed much in the last few thousand years.

Yet, I could also say that literature does not exist for its predictable use or sense. Whether the text is carried by stone tables or printed circuits, is not a secondary but a civilizational question. And how the stone table or the printed circuit affects the text itself is a question of Aesthetics, possibly Literary Theory. The existence of literature, however, is neither a question of civilization, nor Aesthetics. That the sun will rise tomorrow is a hypothesis according to Wittgenstein. Had we not blind and stubborn faith in this hypothesis, we would go mad. And if it rises—and rise it will—our fears and hopes regarding the future of literature will be just the same they were yesterday. And I believe there is nothing more reassuring for a writer than that.

Translated by Júlia Morcsányi.
After the lavish breakfast (conserves glittering in various colours, offal and caviar) Neifile walked over to the crystal ball, and asked the flames to show them a true man, a politician of noble line. But the flame rearing up in the crystal ball offended them by not looking at them as it began to speak.

“Perhaps he is a poet, whose gaze seeks the invisible sea,” mused Giannetta.

Have the perfumed ladies of Graz and Venice, the peasant wives of Csáktornya, the merchant women on the heel of armies, with their fatal maladies, caused me to forget the unruly forests which the setting sun and solitude would cloak in purple? the Voice began solemnly. I waited in the forest. All about me smouldered war, like a spark in the August brushwood. Or like anxiety, like jealousy, which according to the Spirit is stronger even than love.

How far was Trakostyán! How far the merry Draskovics estate! Behind the marshes I waited for the Turks, and imagined Draskovics’s house and my fair lady Eusebia, whom in my verses I named Viola. “Oh, how alone you are, Eusebia,” I sighed. You lie in the depths of the forest like a violet with a drooping head. Only my eye sees you, my secret watch, which lifts the veil from your face like a breeze caressing the grass. I imagined my intended bride as she pined alone in the carousing and turmoil of the Draskovics house.

Yet I could not set off to Trakostyán; I could only console my sad violet in verse. These were dawn verses, hopeful, yet cheerful, because the winter had laid bare the ground, and laid bare desires—I had seen my violet without a veil or aigrette. I had a terrible dream: Draskovics’s guests, the revelling Croatian and Styrian lords sneak up to her room. The walls open up, and Eusebia’s locks of hair are tousled in the strong wind.

But this nocturnal flower was different to the Viola I had seen in springtime. Below her dark blue aigrette flashed the head of the...
gorgon, and the dreams were interspersed with heavy breathing, not only my own, but someone else’s, who watched me longingly from the end of the halls. I could not set off the following spring either, because the war began again. I could not set off in summer, for I had to travel to Vienna with my brother Péter. I could not set off in autumn, because Draskovics sent word that he was very ill, and was not receiving guests in his castle.

Perhaps something is being plotted against me. Perhaps another fiancé is expected in Trakostyán! Perhaps Draskovics would be happy to see the Frangepán rather than me, Miklós Zrínyi. By day I imagined my sorrowful, tame Viola, and by night the cruel, into whose room drunken lords slip. This was what I had always feared!

But Eusebia was not to be either my true or my secret betrothed: Draskovics did not yet give his final answer, and instead of going myself I sent my poems by way of deputation. Then came a new spring, a new summer. The Hungarians bled, the Turks bled; only my Viola remained in the depths of the forest, inscrutable.

But that dog Draskovics did not reply. He laid back his ears, keeping his seat in Trakostyán: he bade me be patient, and had hon- eyed words for my deputations. It was winter, sparkling cold, the Turks had cleared out, and I remained alone in the sparkling snow, with my woes under the December sky. I did not write a verse about the saker falcons screeching to the heavens, because I had a disturbing dream: alone, I turn towards a lovely little hill, and see three drops of blood on the path. Nothing stirs, not even the breeze, only the drops of blood glitter in the vast whiteness, and I know that behind the hill lurks a monstrous brute.

Sorrow carried me, like a champing horse, further and further away. In vain did I wait for spring, for a twinkle of summer; there was no word of my Viola. They offered me another fiancée, beauties with aigrettes and pearls, but Eusebia my violet, hiding away, bound my heart. I could not go to Trakostyán: in my castle I was studying Tacitus, the art of machinations, of disguise, and the deeds of all the good rulers. I sat in the depths of my halls, and listened to the wailing arising from the heart of my fine motherland; this fair, sick woman might perhaps be worthier of my love, than the perfidious Viola. The days and years circled on, and as soon as spring came, Draskovics sent word, as luck would have it, that he would be happy to see his son-in-law.

So the whole world and my heart prepared for the nuptials! But whatever the Draskovicses had cooked up, however finely they received me in Trakostyán, my Viola continued to be cruel. I ride with her in the Trakostyán forest. If I speak to her gently, if I merely ask her, my fair betrothed flashes a look of derision and contempt at me. And were these eyes not loving and warm! There was an urgent, cold blue sparkle in them. Though I summoned Marino with enthusiasm, I felt that these blue-lit eyes would surely not object if I shook the reins of the horse, and wrestled the daughter of Gáspár Draskovics to the floor.

I did not enjoy these riding excursions. Eusebia was surrounded by suspicious folk in Trakostyán: Dalmatian, Croatian, Styrian, Italian hostlers, all manner of frivolous lordly folk. They looked my betrothed up and down, and her face only lit up when the hunting horn sounded, and she bolted away ahead of the hostlers after the game.

“She’ll calm down, she’ll soften,” I thought, “when after the nuptials I lead her to my house, my bed,” and I promised I would give her her fill of delights. “After all, embracing is the least I can do,” I thought. “She will calm, if I read her Italian verses. Passion will be tamed by an eloquent foreign language, and she shall see that a gracious, learned court is a greater merit than to lead the hunt. That time will come, and our hearts shall join not only in tempestuous lovemaking, but also in the words of the mass.” But when I first embraced her, her rale, the three drops of blood I saw on the snow, which my memory superimposed on the body of my Violet, reminded me that my woman is stronger than words.

But I did not resign myself so easily. When she returned from the hunt I drew her to myself, and whispered sweet Italian words in her ear—but she became grave, like a falcon shut in a small cage. “Such a wounded heart cannot be consoled by poetry,” I thought,
and I tried to satiate my Violet with promises: “You shall be the wife of the palatine, the prince’s wife, the queen, we shall protect this wounded, tortured country, better than my ancestor Miklós Zrínyi the first, the almighty Hector Szigeti.” Eusebia merely shook out her hair. I was going to quote a couple of lines of verse from Marino, but I saw that my Viola had fallen asleep.

Spring came, summer, then another spring, another summer. The war did not abate, Turkish incursions nibbled away at my lands, and I took up arms every spring. Every winter I ordered new books, I built, sweated, read, negotiated, but the Diana of Trakosztvány would not be calm. She bore my touch, but fell asleep if I quoted verse. She was frigid towards me, and nothing lightened her heart but the forests and the hunters’ horns.

Another spring came, another summer, but no matter how often I embraced this unruly woman, each time I thought of why I had not pressured Gáspár Draskovics more for the wedding: I had always feared my Eusebia. As time passed, Eusebia became angular, strapping, and strange though it be, even fairer. I no longer called her Viola, because this wild beauty no longer hid from me, it looked right through me; if I spoke to her, she stroked her shoulders.

“I’m provoking fate,” I thought, and I felt how alone I was. A delirious, warm, humid, rainy winter came. The peasants whined, the game in the forests was disturbed, but in March (what a miracle!) snow covered the forests along the River Dráva. Cold fell on the land, with my ealdormen I pondered the plans for fresh marauds, but from the window I heard the sound of the hunting horns. I saw my Eusebia ride out merrily ahead of her hunters. “There will be war, you shall see, my lord,” said Balázs Trankóczi. But now I did not see the war, only the bloody clothes of my spouse, and behind her the insolent cheer on the faces of the hostlers.

“We’ll continue later, my lords,” I said to Trankóczi. “I’ll follow her, I will follow her,” I said to myself. “Perhaps Eusebia will be grateful if I share in her amusement.” But in truth it was cheerful impudence that sent me after my wife: jealousy, which according to the Spirit is stronger even than love. My horse trampled on early, frozen flowers, and in time I reached the hill on the snow-covered path where in my dream I had seen the drops of blood. But I was not frightened now. I went on the track of the fallen game, and saw exactly what in the depths of my dreams I had always seen. Above bleeding corpses, fallen rabbits, one of the hunters was kissing my wife. His hand grasped her breast, and my lady laughed, how happily, how recklessly she laughed!

I killed the hunters (all three) in the clearing. In my fearsome rage I even killed the hostler boy who held the halter. I brought my sobbing, bound woman to Csáktornya, and the courtiers, who yesterday had paid her compliments, look on with satisfaction as I set my wife at the centre of the court. I had to bring judgement on her in public, before the eyes of everyone. If I had found her beyond the hill, other may also have known what she was up to. “In three hours you shall be dead. Choose: my sword, or poison,” I said. “Whichever you choose, this is the last I see of you.” I would have like her to sob; I would have like her to entreat with me; I would have liked the blue lights in her eyes to take fright. But Eusebia conquered her tears: all she said was that she wanted poison, and she looked at me no more.

“Let us continue, gentlemen,” I said to Trankóczi, and pored over the map in order not to see them cover the corpse of my Viola. Afterwards I sensed a wild, happy delight, and I saw that my soldiers respected me with bowed heads and silent lips. I ordered an expensive wreath of violets from Parma for my wife’s tomb, and listened with disinterest, with one ear to the curses of the Draskovics.

I did it because it was permitted. “My second wife shall be a tame, blonde woman,” I promised. “I shall smother the memory of Eusebia in the excitement of marauding, the screams of pain from the spahis, the rustle of pages in the library.” But Viola came to meet me in the depths of all my dreams: she was beautiful, comely, but I felt that a few minutes later her features would be contorted by a fatal poison.

“Why did you do this to me?!” I shouted, but I sensed that she
would not reply; that in a couple of moments she would be dead. I covered her with petals, I covered her with my own words. I mourned her as the world does not permit cuckolding women to be mourned... and wherever I went, whatever I read, whatever I planned, I sensed that I lived with a dead woman. Military engineers arrived, imperial envoys, my new wife came, but I went through the forests alone, because if I saw a saker falcon, it reminded me of my unruly wife.

Wherever I went I was torn by grief. Every day the poison worked in me. Every day it infected something in me. “I would rather forgive you!” I shouted at the woman lurking in my thoughts, whom I sought in vain in the heart of the forest, for she appeared and then vanished like a light mist before a whirlwind. I saw the heavy soil digest her limbs, but I knew that as long as I can remember, so her face shall be remembered. I thought of her as much as did the Thracian Orpheus of his Eurydice. I pleaded with the gods to have a glimpse of her, even if that glimpse should mean my death.

Spring passed, summer passed, and autumn. The blue sky covered me like a coffin, yet there was still so much to do! Either now or never! Ahmed Köprüli set out on a military campaign against Hungary. Perhaps I shall desire no more, perhaps I shall forget her, there will be nothing but the memory of an unruly girl, or the sea, the unattainable distant sea, in my heart. “Yet again she haunts me,” I thought, as the scent of wild spring struck my face. And I knew that I would set out on her tracks on one of the hunts, and though my weapon be in my hand, I would be helpless.

Translated by Richard Robinson

Centauri

THREE VILLANOVELLAS
(short stories)

Casimir Spieler

The Villa Bagatelle had stood in good repute from the outset, over which time many fashions had swept across the world. Accordingly, a wide assortment of eccentrics had passed through its doors. Realists, idealists, bigots, snobs, pacifists, spiritualists—one would have trouble listing them all. A Villa regular in the early Thirties was Casimir Spieler, in his day a very well-known figure, a truly curious young man, whom one might perhaps best categorize as an occultist. He carried magic stones in his pocket; he was embarking on a career as a writer and, one must admit, did everything he could to further that cause. That included not shrinking from magic. But at the same time he worked maniacally; to begin with in a small rented flat in Kispest, later on in sundry coffee houses, but in the end exclusively in the Villa Bagatelle. Many writers created there for the simple reason that that was where they felt comfortable and could be drawn into productive shape under the pear tree in the garden. Handy though this might be, it would nevertheless be untrue to state that this was why young Spieler decided on the Bagatelle. The question is, therefore, what else, if not the appeal of the place, induced him to stay?

Casimir commenced work on a dark, earth-shaking work—a horror novel straightaway. Only before long he was seized by the misapprehension that because the novel was unmasking Evil the dead were angry, and they were doing all they could to ensure that the work would never reach print. He left the manuscript of the first draft on a bus. Days later he
read that a bus had run free and plunged into the Danube. He was convinced this must have been precisely the one on which the manuscript had been left. A few weeks later he and a girlfriend overturned whilst canoeing on the Ráckeve side-branch of the Danube, as a result of which the river swallowed up a second version, for Casimir, one needs to know, took the manuscript everywhere. The girlfriend had escaped, but even that was no consolation. After many more incidents of this kind, one day he decided not to take the work with him on the grounds that it would anyway be lost or submerged or plucked from his hand by a gust of wind.

By the time he got back home the flat had burned down and a seventh version had gone up in smoke. Casimir took it as gospel that the Villa Bagatelle was the one place in the city where the furious spirits were unable to harm him. He laboured assiduously for a whole year at a table reserved for him in the winter garden, but only when he was raising a glass of champagne to celebrate finishing the novel did it occur to him to wonder how he was going to get it out of the Villa, for the moment he stepped outside he was sure to be struck by a bolt of lightning.

"That’s what comes of writing about the nature of Evil," he declared self-importantly and with more than a trace of affectation, whereupon a pretty and naïve waitress advised: "You can safely leave the book here; it can’t do us any harm. Go back home and write another one about the nature of Good—or do you know nothing about that?"

The Canary Test

Nothing characterizes Natascha König better than that in her time the life of the Villa was one of constant ferment. Not that she kept on turning it topsy-turvy. Quite the reverse, her irresistible beauty and strength stimulated one and all to pulsating life. There was a weekly turnover of personnel, though not like there had been in the time of cantankerous Rosa Síkfókúti. They were not dismissed; all that happened was that one after the other they fell in love (and were put in the family way), one after the other they married, conceived other plans, acquired backers, and found long-lost siblings.

Behind this bubbling stood, first and foremost, Natascha’s odd duality. For one thing, she bewitched everything she clapped eyes on, including the pear tree in the garden. Later on, Cuno often remarked that in earlier days the ancient tree used barely to put out a shoot in spring, and it was reckoned to be a good year if two or three fruits were found on it at the end of summer, though now, of course, in the countess’s time, the crop was so abundant there was even some to spare for distilling marc! But on the other hand, Natascha's aloofness was legendary near and far. It was impossible not to worship her. Everyone did indeed adore her, and the whole world waited for the countess herself to be happy at last—for her exaltedly ensconced, splendid peace and strength to find a worthy partner and purpose. At complete variance with all expectations, however, Natascha glittered alone like the Sun even after years. She shone on all equally, and irresistibly, but like the Sun no-one could not get close to her; she too remained unapproachable. She would not even permit a hand to be kissed, which strict etiquette would deem grossly insulting, but she did everything in such a way that her untouchability should remain courteous and entrancing.

All this was looked on with unconscious amazement by the personnel, by guests who came from far afield, and by aristocrats of the surrounding district. There was just one person who found it entirely natural, this being none other than Cuno, the head butler. Little wonder, because he too behaved in much the same fashion. He would astonish even old employees time and again with his attentiveness, yet there was never so much as a hint, even after the friendliest of gestures, that this might signify a relaxation of the rigour or provide the slightest basis for any familiarity.
In this world, which these two people, Natascha and Cuno, without any prior arrangement, ran in complete harmony as equal parties, everything was clear and regulated yet charged with life notwithstanding. Before long, due to proposals of marriage and exchanges of wedding vows, new personnel had to be taken on at the house—more in fact than had left service, so Natascha decided. On the day that they were to be hired she asked Cuno to take the canaries up to the terrace on the first floor as that was where they were going to interview applicants. Things like that were usually left to the head butler, but Cuno has not surprised, imagining that Natascha must be so fond of the canaries that she could not even dispense with their company for even a couple of hours.

Seventeen young men and women were interviewed on hiring day. All arrived with outstanding references; the way they acquitted themselves, their demeanour, was immaculate so it seemed it would be difficult to make a choice.

“Who would you take on?” Natascha asked Cuno.

“We had some extremely highly qualified and well-mannered candidates, it’s hard to choose, but I think perhaps the valet from Vác.”

“What he had to offer was truly entrancing, and the young man’s expertise was impressive, but for me he only came out second.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why not first?”

“It’s like this, you see, my dear Cuno. However well-mannered they may be, anyone who did not vouchsafe the canaries so much as a glance is out of the question. Anyone who does not so much as notice a bird, whatever else he may do, will also be disdainful of a guest.”

“But surely the young man from Vác went so far as to praise them!” Cuno interjected, thinking that maybe the countess had forgotten.

“Praise them he did indeed, Cuno, and what’s more he even poked a finger in though the bars of the cage. He noticed them, but he had no respect for them; he took liberties. The valet from Vác was worthless! Do you catch my drift, my dear Cuno?” Natascha asked, whereupon Cuno, for the very first time in his life, was amazed by the countess from the very bottom of his heart and finally understood the meaning of Natascha’s justly famed, exquisite aloofness. He instantly grasped that she must be guarding something more precious than anything else for a future man. And while Natascha peered at his face with the Sun’s improbably close, almost intimate radiance, Cuno squared up to the fact that he could finally see a person who was just as precise, sharp-sighted, and at the same time passionate as himself, and that person, moreover, was a woman!

**Trifling Matter**

There were times when furious arguments would break out even at the Villa. On one occasion the proprietor and his wife disagreed over nothing to speak of; another time the master of the house and the personnel were in dispute, and every evening there would be dissension between the personnel and the guests. One could even point to cases where virtually everyone pitched in. It was a squabble of this kind which arose when, alongside a good few melancholy young poets, a young woman from Tihany who was sadder than them all, Angela by name, became a regular guest. So fragile a figure was she that on the reckoning of Roland Apor, a poet designate—another habitué—the Villa’s canaries would go into a flutter at her arrival for no other reason than that they were eager to get out of their cage to perch on her collar-bones. Angela was a conspicuous presence not merely owing to her rococo features but also on account of her incomparably fine and profound, unbroken sadness. Not for nothing did she feel at ease in the company of the poets since they too, without exception, drank most deeply of all from the cup of despondency. Each thought his own melancholy went well together with Angela’s, whereas Angela would have much rather been freed of low spirits than have them matched with someone else’s. As no-one under-
stood that—at least none of the poets—Angela grew sadder by the day. During the same period of time a frequent visitor at the Villa was a distinguished surgeon by the name of Dr Titus Bánhegyi, who was widely known throughout Europe as a brain researcher. He had little in the way of companionship, or to the extent that he did it was some colleague or other, either a neurosurgeon or a pathologist. Esteemed at every hand he might be, nevertheless it was feared that he engaged daily in digging around in skulls. He personally was aware of this ambiguous status, declaring on one occasion: “Anyone who occupies himself with the demented can easily go mad himself.” On another occasion he asserted: “The only person as mad as me in this city is a hatter. Like me, he also does nothing but measure heads from one end of the day to the other.” Even such self-ironical comments were unable to dispel the idea that not only was the professor’s profession upsetting, but also his very odour. Not as bad as the pathologist’s, true, but hardly any better. Dr Titus Bánhegyi reckoned he had managed to identify the area of the brain which is responsible for sensations of emptiness and hopelessness. Or as he put it: the cerebral bump in which Nothing resides. As a result of that knowledge, the insipid professor became a fundamentally optimistic character, unlike incessantly gloomy Roland Apor. Nor would there have been any trouble had the professor not got into conversation with the poets. Needless to say, from the very outset, a vigorous dispute grew up between the professor and the lyricists, with the latter feeling it to be extraordinarily derogatory that their perpetually tragic view of the world could be ascribed to a cerebral bump.

“It makes a mockery of the sentiments,” exclaimed Hyacinth Németh before quitting the coffee room for that day. Perhaps it was precisely these heated reactions which prompted the professor to renewed cogitation as to what it was which had caused him to decide he would be able to select the most suitable experimental subjects from their ranks. The sort of individual in whom some sort of hopeless longing, or in other words the bump of Nothingness, was more strongly present than in anyone else. A few disputes were enough for Dr Titus Bánhegyi to single out Angela as the first subject for the experimental surgery in the process of which he would remove the bump in question. She, from the very beginning of the arguments between the professor and the poets, had adopted an intermediate position, leaning first one way then the other, declaring on one occasion: “In point of fact I shall not rule out the possibility if it genuinely helps.” On that issue not only Angela but also the argument became unmanageable. Everyone, from Cuno on through the owner of the house down to the very last guest, was utterly against the professor and tried to induce Angela to think better of it. Angela, for her part, grew more obdurate the harder people tried to persuade her. The anti-operation camp split into several factions, each blaming the others for the failure: the poets blaming Cuno; Cuno—the patisserie girl for an ill-judged statement; the patisserie girl—the weather; and the proprietor—“the whole kit and caboodle.” In the end, Angela, fed up of the constant skirmishing around her, one day, without further ado, marched into the professor’s department to be the first in the world to have the so-called “Bánhegyi fragment” resected by the revolutionary operation.

Around Advent, Angela, wearing her usual thin, pale-blue tulle skirt despite the freezing, windy weather, put in an appearance at the Villa Bagatelle. The poets, who were moping more mournfully than ever before, greeted her with exuberant clamour, yet Angela, while showing not the slightest sign of melancholy, remained undemonstrative. “I came to say farewell,” she announced, hovering somewhat flummoxed in front of the winter garden.
“Miss Angela, at least join us as a guest for a cup of tea,” Cuno enjoined, taking a seat from another table and setting it down with the party round Roland Apor’s table. Angela seated herself on the chair. “So, how did the operation work out?” Hyacinth Németh asked in cadences sceptically inflected as ever. “It worked superbly, which is precisely the reason why I’ve come,” Angela kicked off. “There is no longer any sadness in me, and I cannot understand why I ever perceived the world as being so bleak and beyond all hope. I am no longer plagued by unattainable hankerings, a sense of lacking fulfilment. I want to live, can you understand? Simply to live, with or without someone else, that’s no matter, the world is wonderful, exciting, colourful—that’s exactly why I want to see everything there is to see. That is why I am setting off on my travels, touring all over Europe, the high seas and overseas, and if I ever get back it will be a very long time from now, but I did not want to depart without a word of farewell, seeing as how I have spent a fair amount of time here,” Angela enthused, and indeed she thrilled with a fire of which earlier there had not been so much a flicker. For a moment even the flashes of seed in the beaks of the seed-cracking canaries halted. Roland Apor, in contrast, was preparing to utter what were evidently some churlish words of disparagement, but Cuno stepped in: “It’s a treat to see you, dear Miss Angela, a treat for all of us to see you so full of joie de vivre and perfectly all right,” Cuno hastily averred, though the poets’ hostile mood had not lessened a jot, so he added jocularly: “If a time should come when moroseness gains a hold over me too, and I don’t have to pay the cost, maybe I too will submit to the professor’s scalpel.” The poets saw neither point nor purpose to the pun. They switched their gazes indignantly to Cuno while Angela calling to mind, for the first time, something of her old melancholy, turned a trifle sadly to him:

“I’m sorry to say that it will no longer be possible to submit yourself to the professor’s scalpel.”

“Why ever not?”

“Did you not read what happened?”

* 

After the operation Dr Titus Bánhegyi had vanished without a trace, and not just him but his assistants, two medical students, and the anaesthetist as well—twelve altogether who had all been in the operating theatre. All the people who knew exactly where on the brain that bump was. More than likely they were swallowed up by what had, until then, been residing in me. That triviality, that Nothing.

Translated by Tim Wilkinson
Zeus edged the bus in among the pines, and no sooner did he turn off the engine than he heard the animals yapping and growling behind the canvas tarp stretched tight across the cage behind him. Taking a kick against the iron grille, he snapped, “Shut up, you rotten sons of bitches.” But his words were meant not so much for the animals, which couldn’t have possibly kept still, anyway, hungry and pumped up with amphetamines as they were, but more so to finally rouse his clients. They’d been asleep for almost a hundred-and-fifty miles, the man’s head drooped to the side, partly in the woman’s lap, the woman slumped against the fake leather seat and the fiberboard lining the door.

Again Zeus kicked the grille, and as he looked back at his clients there came the sound of the animals thirstily nudging the empty enamel vats over the riveted metal floor of the cage. The man was the first to stir awake, his eyes flitting about in a daze as he seemed to remember what was going on. Placing a hand on the woman’s shoulder and giving her a shake, he whispered something to her. Theirs was a lovely, melodic tongue. Zeus had no idea what it was, Armenian or Gagauz or whatever. Not that he cared a whole lot. The woman, of course, knew at once where she was. She looked first at the industrial cooler where the left-hand seats of the old bus would have been, and then at Zeus: “Are we there yet?” she asked in accented French that Zeus understood easily enough. “Less than half a mile to go,” said Zeus with a nod. “Best you now give me the other half of the money.”
The woman said something to the man, who reached into the pocket of his sport coat and removed an envelope, which he handed to Zeus. After taking the money, Zeus opened one of the cooler's compartments and removed an old ice cream box, which he gave the woman. "Get naked, both of you, and then spread this stuff over yourselves nice and thick. I'll count the money meanwhile."

Taking the box, the woman said something to the man and then began undressing. The man now did so, too, removing his shirt and his pants before opening the box. Staring at the greasy yellow cream, he posed the woman a question, at which she, naked, turned to Zeus: "What is this?" she asked, "My husband wants to know."

Zeus gave a wave of the hand. "Bear lard," he said, "What else. But no more questions. We agreed no one would ask a thing. Spread yourselves all over, head to toe, and don't leave your hair out, either. Don't bother about it being smelly. By the time you're done, I'll be all set, too."

Removing a small ultraviolet lamp from beside the rest of the money in the strongbox by the driver's seat, Zeus caressed each banknote and lit them up one by one, sniffing at some. Noticing the man watching him, he growled at him, in Hungarian, so that not even by chance would he be understood, "What are you staring at?" And then he turned the bills about, crumpling them under the purplish light. "Can't be careful enough, anyone who hasn't seen quality Moldavian or North Korean goods would think there's no counterfeiting these new euros, why, those folks there in Brussels are all agog about high technology, to think what they've been up to even here on the border, laser motion detectors and infrared cameras and magnetic-sensor-equipped walking detection devices everywhere you look, they say the Dutch have already made a prototype of a DNA-sniffing robot dog, supposedly all it'll need is one molecule, and they've installed such a powerful servomotor over its caterpillar tracks that it gets almost to the speed of sound in six-tenths of a second, hell, if they start churning those out then maybe this whole line of work will really be history, even doing it this way costs a small fortune, it takes so much to pull it off that hardly anyone can afford it, I'm lucky if two folks go over a month, and to think that back when there was still a mine barrage here one or two hundred folks took a run at the border a day, and at least half of them got across, yep, those were the good ol' days, when they didn't need all this goddamn high-tech stuff… Zeus scowled, switched off the ultraviolet lamp, and wound a rubber band around the wad of cash, which he then put away. "Exactly the right amount," he said in French, "I'm really pleased." Opening the cooler's largest compartment, he removed two pairs of ice-cold rubber boots and two hooded wetsuits. "All right," he said, handing one set to the man and the other to the woman, "the bear lard will protect you from the cold fabric, at worst your skin will peel off in a couple of palm-sized spots, but the way we're going about it there's no way the infrared camera will see you two, and what little body heat of yours gets through the neoprene, why, it'll be masked by the body heat of the bears.

Taking the wetsuit between his palms, the man shuddered and winced at the cold. He then asked the woman another question. The woman turned to Zeus and said, "What's that supposed to mean, 'body heat of the bears'?" At this, Zeus went over to the iron grille and wrenched off the tarp. "Let's just say you two will be riding bear-back," he said. Beyond the screen were two brown bears, big ones, slapping at the vats. Zeus could hear his clients gasping for air. "Get dressed already," he told them, "No need to get scared, now. The bears are tame, I broke them in myself. This is the only sure way of going about it. Up till now everyone's gotten through this way. Brown bears are a protected species in the Union, the border guards can't go shooting at them, no way. Those Greenpeace folks would let them have it if they even tried. Bears can go wherever they damn please. Heck, the border guards are even happy to see them crossing over—it's a welcome increase in their own bear population, after all." Zeus fell silent and looked at his clients standing there in the wetsuits, the cold steaming off them. The man said something to the woman, but rather than translat-
ing it, she too began to talk. They were arguing, it seemed. Finally she spoke up, again in French. “This is not what you promised,” she said. Zeus broke into a smile. “Sure it is. I said I’d take you two over the border, and that either happens like this or it doesn’t happen at all. But if you don’t like it, that’s fine, too. If you want, I’ll take you back to the nearest town. But I can’t give back the money. Sorry, but that’s the deal. Talk it over, decide for yourselves.” Zeus turned his eyes back to the bears. The man said something very loud, at which the woman started to shout, but the man kept at it, too, and then the woman suddenly gave him a slap. The man fell silent. Turning at the sound of the smack, Zeus saw the man’s face turn slowly blue, more from the cold than from the blow, it seemed; at which the woman said something to the man, who nodded. The woman looked at Zeus. “All right,” she said, “we’ll give it a try.”

Zeus gave a wave of the hand. “All right,” he said. Reaching again into the cooler, he tossed them the green, army shoulder-bag. “Go ahead and pack your stuff in there. Then come on, we’ll go to the back, where I’ll open up the door and we’ll go inside to the bears. The important thing is to move slowly, and once you’ve sat up on them, hold those bellybands tight. The bears will only start off when I give a whistle. They’ll go for the smell of water, and the creek is on the other side of the border. Up till then they know which way to go; and once they’ve gotten there, they’ll start drinking right away, and that’s right when you should get off their backs. Being drugged up and all, the bears are pretty fast, and you don’t want them bringing you back. Walk along the creek bed downstream to the first bridge. Then you’re on the main road; you can keep the rubber boots, but leave the wetsuits under the bridge.”

Zeus waited for them to finish packing. Then he left the bus, and they followed; the man brought the bag. It was dark. The mud squelched around their heels as they went to the rear of the vehicle. The man’s boots must have been a bit too big, for he almost fell before the woman grabbed his arm. Pulling a chain, Zeus lowered the ramp, a sheet of roof iron nailed over some boards that creaked its way down. And then, turning the winch, Zeus opened the back door of the bus. Standing there in the dim light streaming out of the cage, he turned to his clients and took two thick, document-stuffed envelopes from his pocket. “Getting across will be a cinch,” he said, handing them over, “but be careful, they can ask for your papers anywhere up to thirty miles from the border. Not that you’ll get far with these Kazakh diplomatic passports. No, they’re just good enough to win you some time. The best thing would be if you say you got AIDS, because then you’ll automatically be granted refuge status on medical grounds. But for that you need the virus, too. Lucky for you, you went with an old pro like me. For another twenty percent I can take care of that for you, too.” Reaching into his pocket even before he finished speaking, Zeus pulled out two syringes and held them out toward the woman, who said something to the man, who firmly shook his head. “We have no more money,” said the woman.

Zeus put the syringes away. “Whatever,” he said with a shrug. “Your call. Now I’m going to open the cage and we’ll go inside to the animals. Follow me nice and slow, got that? I don’t want to be saying a word in there, and I’d advise you people not to, either. So it’s best I say good-bye right now. Have a safe journey, best of luck, have a happy life.”

Translated by Paul Otchvary
For days they’ve been sending them down to sweep and rake. It’s started, the continuous tidying up around the outer barracks. Until all the leaves are gone, until the trees have gone completely bald, they’ll tidy up the yard in their evening free time. They sweep the little piles of leaves into prisms, and when all the prisms have been lined up in orderly rank and file and there is not so much as a single stray crumbling leaf, only then are they allowed to bring the garbage container over. That’s the rule. Just as they finish a prism, a gust of wind scatters it and sends another mass of leaves cascading from the trees. It’s like scooping water into a leaky bucket. They stand, clutching their twig brooms, and discuss whether or not the time has come. Another gust of wind and the leaves swirl up high into the air, as if longing to alight again on the trees. Gazsi Tóth suggests taking a smoke break. Yesterday Bernát proposed speeding up the whole process, giving nature a helping hand by shaking the leaves from the trees. With a single manoeuvre, taking care of tomorrow’s work, getting rid of all the debris at one fell swoop. Didn’t seem like a bad idea, but wasn’t practicable either. There were lots of trees, and it’d be impossible, you couldn’t shake off all the leaves anyway. Plus the whole thing might cause a scandal. In Private Rab’s opinion, it is unbecoming to interfere in the mystical workings of nature.

After putting out their cigarettes, they decide to give it a shot all the same. They walk around the trees; some of them you just have to give a good kick with your boot. They butt the trees with
the brooms, dangle from them, hit them with their fists, shake and tug them. The trees lurch and creak; leaves shower from their branches. They work in a hurry, no time for prisms, it’s late, and no one’s checking up on them. Tóth manages to get another container from behind the mess hall. Rab and Szabó round up the leaves, push them towards the containers, while Bernát and Mótrik scoop them up and in. Varró and Fater jump up and down on the containers, pushing them down so that they can stuff in as many as possible. By the time *Il Silenzio* sounds they’ve rolled the two bloated containers back to their places, wisps of leaves poking out through the gaps.

After lights-out, Bones reads by flashlight, Varró tosses and turns on the upper bunk, the mattress bulging through the diamond-shaped holes in the wire, chaff and dust sprinkling onto the book. Bones goes to the bathroom, where you can smell the wet root scent of the night. One of the windows is broken. His body hard, fresh and alert, he lifts his foot, turns the faucet on and off with his toes, pulls his lips back, baring his teeth at the blotchy mirror like a lemur. He opens wide his maw, stares at the roof of his mouth, furrowed like the sands of an ocean beach. He leans closer, the skin of his face is hard, coarse from shaving.

In the morning, as the day’s orders are issued, the whole regiment is confronted with the fact of the denuded trees. Instead of drooping boughs, brown, yellow and green the day before, the wind gnaws at bare branches. There’s a clear view to the officers’ compound. Yesterday evening, the platoon assigned the task of clearing the leaves had, under the cover of darkness, zapped the trees. Everyone’s whispering or giggling about it, either with admiration or envy, curious to see if there’ll be any consequences.

In the morning multipart rifle training at the outer shooting range.

They get the guns from the storehouse, live ammunition out at the range. Taki Pap checks the guns to be sure they’re in working order, last year one blew up in a guy’s hand, they had to make a new ID card for him when he was discharged because of his face.

Taki Pap and Andersen supervise the exercise, the wind dies down, it’s cold and the air is clear, visibility is good. Lining up on the range they’re told if you shoot well, if in three shots you hit the ten three times, if you shoot thirty and you get the following routine task right you get three days leave. They would pass out the ammo, but the trunk is nailed shut and no one has a pair of pliers. Ensign Andersen lifts up the trunk and smashes it on the pavement. Interesting, he notes, that it didn’t explode.

First they take a practice shot. They divide up the ammo, three rounds each, the rounds jingle in Bones’s hands. Next to him Varró rattles them in his tremendous palms like three grains of oats. Hit the circle in the centre, the size of a coin, three times from two hundred metres. It had been years since anyone had managed that, and the guy had been a sports marksman as a civilian. They lie in place, load, the long, streamlined shells bearing the stench of death disappear into the chambers, everywhere you can hear the clatter of the safeties being unlocked. Taki Pap walks the line behind them, kicks their legs apart, they look like a row of Ys lying on the ground.

Bones is concentrating on what Bernát had been explaining on the way, how to get his heartbeat down into his knees. You empty your mind, don’t think of anything, don’t think of the denuded trees, the hair growing on your chest, forget poor Mikos and his burns, the tea gurgling in your bowels, the mop and the itchy fungus on your thigh, everything. Cease to be. You cease to be, and your heart beats in your knees. You have to wait, on the crest of the hill the crisscross of barbed wire, somewhere they are burning fallen leaves, an infinitely barren landscape, yet so many details. They give the order to shoot, the cracklings begin to resound, the gun kicks hard, cease firing, they stand up at attention.

Taki Pap looks at the targets through binoculars. He sends a man to gather the sheets. Bones hit the third and fourth circles, at the bottom left, near to each other. If he’d shot accurately, it’s because he’d managed to gauge how much the gun was off. They pass out the next rounds of ammo, anyone who hits the bull’s-eye three
times can go home. Opportunity is hovering tremulous in the air. His gaze bores into the distance, he and his rifle melt into one, suddenly he senses that someone is looking at him, he glances up, and on his right he sees a naked old man with a white, tousled beard sitting cross-legged, his hair dishevelled, staring at him with sparkling blue eyes.

Good lord, I've lost my mind, I'm hallucinating. He aims not at the black circle, but rather to the upper-right to correct for the flaw in the sights of the gun, he sends his heartbeat into his knees, he doesn't breathe, he goes numb, his whole being is taking aim, focusing on the point in the distance. Slowly he pulls the trigger, a light touch on his shoulder, the old man leans his elbow into his palm, as if he were helping, another moment, then boom, he concentrates, fires again, boom, boom, he winces, can't keep himself from blinking. The hot shells tumble out at his side. The others start to fire with such an awful clatter that his ears begin to ring. They come to attention, then stand at ease waiting for the results. Taki Pap reads the numbers out to the clerk, they stop when they get to one of the sheets, look at it closely, the group captain shakes his head in disbelief. The private standing beside him glances back as if he were looking for someone. Ensign Andersen says, no fairy-tale ending here, Andersen is dead. Sabján continues, throwing his voice: Snow White became a whore, they raped the dwarves.

They call out their names, Gáspár Tóth and Sabján shot the best, twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Then they call out Bones's name, Taki Pap clears his throat and says: thirty. They stand mouths agape, eyes bulging, hands in the air. The clouds stick to the sky, suddenly they all harden in the motionless space of an old photograph. A hot wave bursts up from Bones's gut, he feels dizzy, everyone turns towards him. He can't remember going over to get the sheet. He can't even look at it, Bernát immediately snatches it from his hand, they pass it around, no way, they whisper, no way. No one is paying attention to Taki Pap, who is reading the last results. They pass around Bones's sheet like a sacred object, a relic, looking flabbergasted at the paper one moment and Bones the next, Bones, who is speechless, just grinning foolishly. Taki Pap gets sick of the chit-chat, calls them to attention. For the next half-hour Bones feels like someone being pushed through a tube, but stuck halfway.

At lunch they toss sixty tins of food from the truck onto a tent flap, along with ten loaves of bread and fifty kilos worth of apples. There's a thin layer of salty aspic on the tops of the tins of meat. They keep glancing at him with disbelief and envy, then the mood changes. They start to look on him as they might on an invalid, as if there were something wrong with him, as if he were not entirely normal. The second shooting exercise begins, the routine task. Every time the rifles pop, his nerves shudder. He gets the ammo, loads, gets into place, awaits the command. He closes one eye, looks through the sights at the range where the enemy will attack. The half-figure pops up, the fibreboard kraut, he slides a few metres to the side, they have to shoot him down in six rapid-fire shots. When they hit him, he shudders, whispers Heil Hitler, and falls into the dirt.

He knows the whole platoon is looking at him. Even the guys lying down are half-focused on him, watching him. Taki Pap is standing behind him, his legs apart. Some of them are already shooting when the kraut pops up in his stretch of the range. Stocky body, small, round head: a village butcher reenlisted as an Oberleutnant. He slides from left to right, rigid in his pose, the cables creak. Bones fires immediately, the rifle jumps in his hands, he pulls the trigger again. The kraut slides to the end, stops, vanishes. Rapid-fire, private, rapid-fire, Taki Pap yells.

Yes, he had screwed up, he had let go of the trigger, he had shot single shots instead of rapid-fire. And even so he had missed, but he still had four bullets. The brown fibreboard rose up again, so close you could have hit it with a rock. The remaining ammo should be shot all at once, rapid-fire, it couldn't fail. Hit with the first shot, afterwards it's harder with the barrel jumping in your hands. Again he notices the shadow, he doesn't look towards it, just
strengthens his peripheral vision for a moment: the same naked old man. His teeth clenched, he forces himself to focus on the plywood Nazi gliding through the grass. He aims right at the bastard’s heart, just above his heart to the right, to be more precise, taking into account the faulty sights, but when he starts to shoot he feels something strike his ribs on the side where the old man is sitting, a nervous twitch runs down his arm, maybe that’s why he pulls the trigger too fast. The barrel leaps up, knocks his hands and shoulders back and forth, he tries in vain to control it, keep it on target. Then he just shoots, shoots, the earth spits up dirt as he fires, he smells the odour of gunpowder, and he can’t believe his eyes, the kraut is enwrapped in a cloak of immortality, unwounded, sliding with dignity to the side of the stretch, where he stops, steps onto the invisible paternoster and vanishes.

Everyone stops shooting, a mighty silence breaks over the land. At the edge of the horizon a flock of crows floats westward along an invisible thread. Taki Pap’s yelling wakes him from the end-of-the-earth numbness, damn it soldier, you’re going to shoot that fucking kraut or I’ll kick your ass. He gets Bones another six rounds. Bones can’t speak because of the plaster hardening in his throat. Now everyone is staring at him, the boys in the dugouts beside him too, leaning on their elbows. He waits. He looks to the side. No doubt about it, in the centre of the military firing range, surrounded by watchtowers, a strictly secret location protected with double barbed wire, a naked old man was sitting on the ground. No, there’s no way, it’s the demon of self-loathing, don’t concern yourself with him!

He tries to wrap himself in a cocoon, become numb, deaf, his body hard asphalt that they poke in vain, the proddings blocked by the armour of frozen nerves. Only his eyes and his right index finger are alive, he focuses all his attention on them. He loathes the wooden Nazi, wants to riddle him with holes, blow him to pieces. When the kraut pops up, he aims and fires, all the bullets have whistled from the barrel and he is still pulling at the trigger. The kraut hasn’t even reached the middle and he’s out of ammo, in the descending silence you can hear him continue on his way along the squeaky cable. When he reaches the end he stops with a creak, almost as if he were taking a bow, auf Wiedersehen, he whispers, and vanishes. Something could happen, the apocalypse could break out, but no. He hears the people behind him, the despairing and angry clamour, Taki Pap screaming, the swearing, but he just stares at a small tree in the distance. His mind begins to clear as they await the order to board the truck. Ensign Andersen looks at him with pity and disgust. Bones doesn’t hear what he is saying, only sees his mouth say no fairy-tale ending, Andersen’s dead. He sits on the platform, it begins to rain, he stretches out his hand, two drops fall on it, one vanishes, the other remains on his palm.

Meanwhile back at the barracks the news is spreading that they are launching an inquiry into the case of the denuded trees. The officer on duty examined the containers bursting with leaves, consulted Major Juhos, deputy commander of the regiment, questioned the commander of the guard who had been on duty the previous evening, then called in Gáspár Tóth, head of the cleaning platoon. Tóth testified that at just about half past eight a stormy gust of wind had torn the leaves from the trees, to which Major Juhos replied that anyone who deliberately damaged a work of nature serving to conceal a military objective and furthermore compounded his wrongdoing by lying would find himself before a military tribunal.

After lunch Sabján comes into the barracks for the reserve divisions and with a ratfink smile announces that to the best of his knowledge they can only avoid lockup if they can get the belt of forest surrounding the compound back to its original state. Suck my cock, says Gáspár Tóth, and Sabján raises his eyebrows, his mien hardens, he sticks up his middle finger and leaves. They speak with a clerk who can’t confirm the news, then group captain Rácz runs in, platoon, attention, and as red as a lobster he
gives the order, doesn’t care how, but by tomorrow there’d better be leaves on those fucking trees. If tomorrow they don’t find the training grounds looking just like they looked before they’re going to turn the case over to internal affairs. Sabotage. They could get as much as two years. And then they’d have to do the full two years of military service, not just the eleven months for students with deferred admission. That’s a total of four years, and they’ll be barred from admission to all the universities in the country. They don’t have to take part in any of the drills tomorrow, but they can’t be in their barracks either, only on the training grounds. You had to believe it. That it was not a mistake, not some bad joke. We’ve humiliated mother nature, said private Rab, disturbed the rhythm, and now we have to atone.

They push the garbage container along and talk about whether or not the officers who had made the decision knew the ancient soldier’s tale of reattaching leaves or had come up with the idea themselves. They get some empty straw mattresses, Technokol Rapid fast-drying glue, scotch tape, and Gáspár Tóth manages to buy a bottle of brandy from one of the warehousemen on the sly, they all chip in for it.

The soldiers watch them from the windows, they point, yell, they want to see how the trees are going to grow their foliage anew, they stop on their way to the mess and shout words of encouragement. They open the container and the wind immediately scatters the upper layer of the hill of leaves. What should they use, Technokol Rapid or scotch tape? Bones and Rab don’t offer an opinion, ever since the exercise at the shooting range Bones has been in a half-dream. The brown figure in the field bows again and again, and giving a creak disappears into nothingness.

There are twelve of them, and they have to re-foliate forty-one trees, roughly three each. It’s not even that big a deal, you can do it. A kind of obstinacy and combat fever start to come over them. Bones decides to use the Technokol Rapid. Standing by the box full of red tubes, he picks one up, quick-drying glue, for use with paper, leather, fabrics, glass and wood, fumes can cause drowsiness and dizziness. Wood. Woods. Lots of people think you can get high off Technokol Rapid, but you can’t really, Palmatek and the Bulgarian glue Kale work much better. Technokol smells good, but it’s missing the essential ingredient, toluene.

Bones gets the three trees in the corner at the far side. He climbs up the first with glue in his pocket and sacks full of leaves on his back. He is out of the sight of the others, but the guard walking alongside the fence passes by beneath him every two minutes, looking at him with curiosity while he works. There aren’t just horse chestnut trees encircling the training grounds, there are poplars, sycamores, and a little cluster of white-trunked birches by the dining hall. In general Bones knows tree names, he even likes the sweetsounding ones, maple, ash, poplar, cause they have interesting overtones, but as far as which one denotes which tree, he has no idea. He knows the trees as a sight, a spectacle, on the one hand, and as names, as words on the other. Sometimes there is some connection, he recognizes pine trees, birches and horse chestnut trees too. Fruit trees too, if they are bearing fruit.

Echoing flappings, the wind whips the regiment flag, and another noise, sharp, jingling, as the metal wire they use to raise the flag slaps against the pole. He’s still in the trance he fell into after shooting, but the fresh air and the cozy feeling he gets from sitting alone in a tree help him regain his senses. He grabs a bunch of leaves from the sack, looks at them in the swaying light of the lamp. Last fall Kamilla had sent the same kinds of leaves in a big envelope, she had written on them with a marker the places where she had gathered them. Course there weren’t just horse chestnut leaves in the sack. He was going to glue birch leaves, oak leaves, sycamore leaves, and who knows what other kinds of leaves to the horse chestnut tree. Spread the glue on the stem, maybe an oak leaf, shaped like an outstretched hand. He sticks it to one of the branches and it stays.

Gáspár Tóth’s whistle announces the break, they gather at the edge of the square, drink brandy, have a smoke. They agree to leave the
upper, slenderer branches to the end, tomorrow they’ll re-fo-}

less on the blue horizon. He descends, the skyscrapers poke
towards the sky, then snowy peaks, the yellow mirror of a desert
striped with highways. The ocean comes into view, he lands next
to a waterside campfire. The flames crackle cheerfully, girls with
long hair and guys with beards sit in a circle. Someone is playing
the guitar. They show no amazement, as if it were the most na-

tural thing in the world for a soldier in uniform speckled with leaves
to plop down from the clouds. Torn blue-jeans, music, smoke,
and, as it is written, they’re smoking pot, clinging to one another
and singing ecstatically. A girl smiles at him, her snow-white teeth
shine, she has a garland of flowers on her head. She takes his hand
and leads him to a caravan. Colourful blankets, incense burners,
the ocean sparkles through the window, you can hear the song
and the crash of the waves. The girl undoes Bones’s belt and
unwraps him from the M65-model training fatigues. He has been
waiting for this for a long time, for millions of years, to lose himself
in the hot, throbbing nothingness. Hand in hand they go back to
the fire, the hippies clap, laughing.

Good lord, he has found his beloved, his brothers, his relatives!
They are playing the guitar, singing, passing him joints. Smells like
cow dung, and makes him cough. He thinks of Kamilla, he should
be doing all this with her, he looks at the girl, her green eyes look
like Kamilla’s.

They ask what life is like back where he came from, and he tells them
how he has been gluing fallen leaves back onto a tree. They are all
delighted by what they hear, with general acclamation they vote to
come to his aid. They put small white stamps on their tongues and
set out in a V-shaped convoy, like wild geese, for Europe. They go
around the clouds, the flocks of birds, the airplanes, the astonished
look of a pilot: long-haired hippies plough through the sky, at their
head a crew-cut soldier boy wearing glasses.

They alight on the horse chestnut tree, the wind has died down in
the meantime, the stars are glittering, it must be about midnight.
Bones, the good host that he is, offers them a sniff of glue. The
hippies speak well of it, good stuff, then one of them takes a gui-
tar in hand, the others get down to work, they sing Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, their hands busy all the while. Bones recites the poem “Hymn for all Seasons” by László Nagy, emphasizing in particular the lines, “If there is a right, it is my right, / Here all power is mine, / I strap on my helmet, my blade! / My beauty, you come to my aid!” Then they all sing together again, tougher songs, Hendrix, Stones, even Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin. They're warbling out Stairway to Heaven in chorus when the watchman stops beneath them. There’s been a change of guard, and he’s curious to see how the work is going. He can still feel the warmth of the guardroom in his limbs, he twists his neck with gloating curiosity. His teeth click together, he reels a bit, and when he comes around again two minutes later he casts only furtive glances upwards.

The same thing.

In the compound of the second battalion Revolutionary Regiment a horde of long-haired hippies, under the leadership of a monkey-faced soldier, is humming Child in Time. The third time round he just squints up out of the corners of his eyes, then he doesn’t cast his glance anywhere, just keeps it fixed in front of him. Trembling, he counts the minutes until the next change of guard. In the guardroom he sits on the bunk, doesn’t say a word to anyone, tries to calm down. When he presents himself for duty again he asks them to put him at the back, as far as possible, near the pigsties. The commander of the guard is quite taken aback, no one likes to be near the sties because of the stench, and it’s far away, this is the last change of guard, watch duty’s longer. No, he definitely wants to go to the pigsties. He trades with one of his fellow soldiers, and he’s been plodding around the path behind the sties for some ten minutes, listening to the snorting, the grunts of the sleeping pigs, when a stocky figure pops up in front of him. Stop or I’ll shoot, he says, pushing in the magazine.

The siren sounds, the whole compound swarms with commotion, searchlights scan the skies and the fence. The officer on duty calls the commander of the regiment, they alert the subordinate units, everyone lines up in the corridors. Turns out one of the men on guard shot a pig by the sties. He’s in a state of shock, they’re taking him to the sickroom. He’s raving, something about hippies and how the CIA has attacked the compound. They give him a shot and he falls asleep. The soldiers climb back into their beds, still warm. The foliate brigade, a reserve platoon of the eighty-second mortar squadron, is given permission to discontinue its work. Done, finished, at least for today. Leaves are stuck to their clothes, as if they had all turned into trees. They straighten up and make for the barracks. Two hours of sleep before reveille.

The pig is still lying on the path, his blood steaming, slowly congealing in the cold. In the morning they put together a report and assign a company to clear away the remains. It’s foggy, but when they issue morning commands everyone can see that the trees surrounding the training grounds are bulkier, you can only see little patches of the officers’ compound on the hill.

Bones’s every pore exudes toluene, not just his mouth. He looks like a guy who’s blown a chewing gum bubble and had it pop in his face. No one pays him the slightest mind. He shaves his moustache, scrapes the grey scales off his skin.

The commander of the regiment examines the carcass of the swine, then walks once around the compound. His face disappears between his service cap and his collar. The trunks and limbs of the trees are wrapped in motley leaf wallpaper, the bare tips of the branches reach out from the pied clumps. Soon the compound is empty, they let everyone go home for Christmas. Comrade Minister Lajos Czinege has personally given the order, and it applies to all those awaiting deferred admission, except for anyone against whom disciplinary measures have been taken. So thus the trees come to see the New Year. In January they set a whole cleaning brigade on them, and by spring the only thing that remains of the interlude is a few little budlets of scotch tape. Then the flood of green inundates everything.

Translated by Thomas Cooper
Krisztián GreCsó

LEGENDARY FIGURES OF A JOURNEY
(short stories)

“Do they still practice magic? Tell fortunes by cards?” (evasively) “Only in the country.”
D.K.

The Cutting Shepherd

Karcsika trudges from the kitchen into the best room of the cottage to fetch the photos and the articles with slow, heavy steps, though he’s only in his forties. I study the stove, black with soot and splodges of spilt and burnt food, and at the same time—because it’s the first time I’ve seen such a thing—try out just how vulnerable a dirt floor is, whether it’s possible to mark the surface with the edge or the heel of my shoe.

“That’s us, in t’picture,” says Karcsika as soon as he returns, “Old Sanyi Foldes, Pista Tokaji, him we called Old Goat-horned Beetle, and these others. And these’re what were written about us.”

I cannot resist his controlled pride, I rest my elbows on the table to get a better look at the collection; the oilcloth makes my skin feel greasy.

“That’re the ones’ he says ‘but we’ve been written up before, ye know.’

“I see” I reply.

On top of the pile, the Smallholders’ Magazine, underneath it the Szeged University paper. I flip through them. A double interview, a mirror held up to a mirror: as I read the answers he gave I try to evoke Karcsika’s voice, and while I’m doing this I decide that, as it’s fitting, I will write up this situation. Here it is: from there, forwards, it’s easy, from here, backwards… who knows.
“(…) Have you never felt it was time you got married? Or don’t you think it necessary?”
“I would’ve, but then my poor mam died, so I put it off… Then the girl left me…”
“What did she have to say about your work? Castrating sheep with your teeth?”
“Well I never told her, did I?”
“You mean your fiancée never knew?”
“She might’ve known, but I never told her.”
“I cut the goat here, yesterday,” says Karcsika, growing bored with the silence, “they grabbed hold of his legs and then I cut him. Grabbin’ him took longer than the cuttin’.”
His impatience is infectious, I can’t restrain the journalist inside me any longer. While we were just sitting here in companionable silence, it almost felt as if I too could be concerned with the seedier aspects of a castrating shepherd’s life.
“How long is it that you’ve been carrying on this trade?” the voice asks from inside me.
“Since I were nobbut a lad,” he says. “That’s when I learned, from t’old shepherds. T’old shepherds showed me how, showed me the way to do it. Once you got the knack, it’s easy.”
“Really?”
“Aye.”
“Oh, I don’t know.”
“I’m tellin’ ye.”
“Depends on the person though, doesn’t it.”
“Ye could do it, easy.”
“It’s kind of you to say so.”
“’S just work, and ye canna do it alone.”
“How d’you do it, then?”
“You need someone to hold t’legs, else ye canna do it. Soon as they’ve got hold of t’legs, I cut into the tip of his purse, go round wi’ the needle, then nip with the teeth. I spit a swig of brandy on it after, not for the taste, mind, just so it won’t get infected.”
I make like I understand, pondering, as if the method of doing it properly was being played out in my mind’s eye. I make him retell, again and again, exactly how the cutting is done. He warms to the task, shuffles to the middle of the kitchen and play-acts for me. Pantomime artist, actor, populist politician. He is holding the shanks of the animal, as if he were about to pick up a child with its back to him. “I hold ‘im by his shanks,” he says, and I try to picture the scene; the hind quaters sink a little and yes, I can see the scrotum tightening. He sits down and smiles.
“D’ye see now?”
I’d like to hug him. “Did they used to castrate animals like this when you were working as a shepherd?” the voice asks from inside me. It was better when I was silent, I think.
“Aye,” says Karcsika. “T’bosses brought out a litre, litre an’ ‘alf of brandy, and we’d be cuttin’ sheep all day. Then we’d build us a fire and make stew out of t’goolies, and very tasty it was, with ‘taties.”
“Does it taste different from other kinds of meat?”
“Cooks quicker, for one. An’ ye can cook it shredded up, with eggs.”
“While you’re cutting animals… how shall I put it… is there no danger of… infection?
Don’t you have to wash the scrotum of the animals before cutting them?” Once again, naturally, it is the voice that puts the question.
Karcsika recoils; I’ve put him off answering questions.
“Now why would I do that? T’is clean enough, it’s got wool on it.”
I wanted us to be pals, and now I’ve been shown up for what I really am: a snob. “Is there still a demand for this type of cutting?”
“Course there is. Why, in the spring, we was snowed under with work for two weeks. Went clippin’ with those shears o’er yonder.”
With his grimy hands he points to the sheep-shears lying on the kitchen stool.
“We trimmed their feet as well, cleaned them up proper. If I had all the sheep I ever clipped wi’ these, if they were all mine! A good sized flock that’d make.”
“And what does the vet have to say to your method of cutting? Has he seen you do it?”
“Course ’e has! Says I do a good job, ’n’ says ’old shepherds used to do it jus’ the same in the old days. An’ one time when Doctor Buda was ’noculatin’ piglets, they asked him to cut the lambs, at one of ’is houses. And Doctor Buda told them to call me. Never had a mite of trouble o’er bein’ cut like this.”

I feign obtuseness for a little while longer, ask whether there are any animals lined up for today. The article would be more authentic if I were present… much shuffling and scraping of feet, I don’t rightly know which word to use, Karcsika looks at me uncomprehendingly, he’s told me quite clearly that there aren’t any animals lined up for today. But we walk out into the yard. Zsófi and Gyurka are munching grass in the back yard, Gyurka is not very happy to see us. Karcsika grabs him and holds him close.

“This is how ye do it,” he says, and lifts up the goat. “Kneel down,” he says, ‘that’s right, now bend down and tek a look.”

I cannot see any mark or wound on Gyurka, who was cut yesterday. True, I can’t see any sign of testicles, either.

“Y’see now,” he asks.

“I see,” I reply, lifting my eyes from the exceedingly flat, soiled and muddy scrotum.

The Shepherd of the Fields

For five minutes there is a profound silence, then Karcsika says a wine-and-soda, or perhaps two, might go down well, and that people have always been wantin’ to hear about Sándor Daru, Rabid Daru as he’s known around these parts. The miserable, muggy morning slowly turns into afternoon, the Kinizsi pub smells frowzy, and through the windows the wide square of the main street of Füzesgyarmat appears dazzling white in the sunlight.

“Who have been wanting to hear about him,” I ask.

“Ah don’t rightly know,” he says, “but these museum people and such like were always comin’ and askin’ questions, an’ he told them what he knew about him.”

“About whom?”

“Rabid Daru.”

“Aha.”

“He were a great man. Must’ve been, seein’ as they were so curious.”

“So who did they ask about him?”

“Old Pista Tokaji.”

“Let’s go,” I say. Karcsika’s four-wheeled contraption, designed to traverse the Russian taiga, squeaks distressingly. Eyes flash through the laths of the fences like in an Italian mafia film; the asphalt steams gently in the heat.

“Been in a contest, I have,” he shouts over his shoulder. “An’ I came fust in cuttin’. They gave me wine, and choc’late.”

“If cuttin’s so easy,” I shout forwards, and grab hold of his shoulder, “that there isn’t even a wound, how can the judges decide who wins?”

“Nobody else was cuttin’,” he says, “cept me!”

“Wasn’t a close contest then.”

“Course it were. I knows how to cut and no one else does.”

Old Pista Tokaji lives on the outskirts of the village; if it stood just a bit further away his house would be called a detached farm. It takes him a while to shuffle out to the gate; his hat is shabby, his waxed moustache sparse and greying, but he walks proudly with his head held high. I tell him the reason for our visit. He walks back into the house, reappears after ten minutes.

“My son donsa want to talk to you because he isna well,” he says.

“But it’s you I want to talk to…” I say.

The kitchen looks worse than Karcsika’s. The dirt floor has not been swept for some time, crumbs crunch underfoot. All the time, even when no one’s walking over them, or at least that’s how it feels. The conversation will be much the same, but I have no inkling of this as yet. We are tongue-tied…

“That Sándor Daru was a great scoundrel, that’s for sure,” he says.
“He had six oxen, eight horses. I worked for him from when I were fourteen, then for twenty years I were a shepherd, until t’Russians came.”

“Is it true that he could work magic? Make animals go rabid for instance?”

“Made ‘em sick an’ made ‘em well. When he saw ‘em hangin’ their heads he made up medicine for ‘em.”

“And could he really call any animal to him without saying a word?”

“He’d give ‘em back the selfsame day. He were a wily one, he were. I took a pitchfork to ‘im once, thrashed him within an inch of ‘is life,” he says, and laughs. “He could hardly stand up on ‘is feet after.”

“Did the people from the village bring their sick animals to him to make them well? The ones that had gone rabid?”

“Nay, they never did!”

“Why didn’t they, if he could make them well?”

“He didna know how to make them well, there were always a rabid dog circlin’ his place. We could hear it durin’ t’night, that there was a rabid dog on the prowl.”

“Pista, I don’t understand. What did he do exactly? Just now you said…I thought you said he made up some medicine, if the animals were hanging their heads…”

“Knock’em on the head!”

“What???”

“With a shovel.”

“But I…”

“He were a wily one, he were. He could make a horse or an ox sick, an’ make them well too. Dogs he said to knock on the head! It was he who made the dogs sick, made them go rabid. I had a sheepdog once, a pull, vanished off me sheepskin coat what we were resting on, never saw it again.”

“Did you get another dog?”

“Daru said to bring a puli from Szeghalom. To buy one off me mate Sándor Szűcs, but he said no. Daru called the dog o’er to Gyarmat in the night, and from there to Barnasziget. The man’d wanted to drive his flock o’er to a new field in t’morning. Never knew what happened to his dog. It were a very good dog, that one were.”

“Can I just ask you again…what’s the truth then…did he heal animals… or didn’t he?…did he really know how to make animals rabid…or not?”

“He disappeared. One day he was gone, just like that. A lot o’folk hated him, I never saw him again. He were a right scoundred, that’s for sure. Had six oxen, eight horses…”

The last sentence reminds me that there were shepherds in Barnasziget who lived their lives without ever even hearing about communism. Perhaps because the devil’s land is never entered in the land register. We have fallen silent. From the next room I hear a rustling, then a couple of despondent groans.

“The lad’s sick again,” says old Pista Tokaji, upon which the lad appears in the doorway. They step up to each other. A father in his nineties and a ‘lad’ well over seventy. The silence is deeper than deep, and in the meanwhile the dog ambles into the kitchen.

The Priest

“How do the infants behave during baptism?”

“Here in Pest they smile throughout, but out in the country where I came from, they cry.”

D.K.

There is a bus as far as Szeghalom, and no further. Hours to wait until the next bus to Csaba. Szeghalom is a small provincial town, a sad and harsh place full of love, desire and dusty devotion. Standing before the county-court feels as if you were standing in the exact centre of the universe; your eyes search instinctively for the sacred pillar and the members of the tribe who believe in it, if need be at the cost of their lives. I stop in front of an industrial unit; women wearing headscarves are stacking plastic crates in the yard. For a short half-hour not a soul passes by. Then a Polski
Fiat rattles into the silence, I wave at it, step off the kerb into the road. It does not swerve to go round me. Father G., former parish priest, is notorious in our part of the world and elsewhere; I bid him good day as if I did not know him. At the time, the bishop of Szeged appeared on television to make a statement, knitting his brow throughout, then auctioned off Father G.’s furniture from the parsonage.

“Which way?” asks the Father.

“To Csaba,” I reply.

When Father G. started a printing press in Szeged, and published works which the clergy welcomed and the secular arm received with some measure of resistance, the bishop is purported to have whispered in Father G.’s ear one Wednesday morning: if you make money out of it, son, half of it is ours, but if you fail, or if someone reports you, then I never knew anything about it.

“Can one ask for a blessing on anything, Father?” I asked.

He does not move a muscle. If I know him, I know him.

“Are you taunting me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you’d like to.”

“Of course not!”

“You want to hear about sperm blessed by God, don’t you?”

“I’m a journalist.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“I didn’t intend it as an excuse. It’s only that once when I had to write up a wedding from start to finish, in a general way, I looked you up.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“No reason why you should. I wouldn’t.”

“If you underestimate yourself, others will do the same.”

“Maybe I’d just like to see clearly.”

“So?”

“You told me about a lot of things that time. About barren women, among other things.”

“But not about sperm blessed by God.”

“No. I only heard about that later. It made a good story… embellished a bit… if that’s what it was…?”

“It was.”

“I also heard that one time, early in the morning, in the dark silence of a stairway, someone asked you whether you’d been giving extreme unction, the last rites to someone?”

“How do you mean?”

“You were on your way home from somewhere.”

“And what did I reply?”

“That you’d certainly given unction, though it had not been the last rites.”

He does not even smile. He remains silent, not the most appropriate reaction for my report. He keeps himself in check, or perhaps does not care about the legendary.I’ve trotted out so impertinently—the figure of the legend does not coincide with the real person. I begin to find our suspended state of stillness insupportable.

“Someone once asked me in a kitchen in Pest,” I say now, “whether there’s any place round these parts where you can see nothing on the horizon. Not a tree, not even a bush.”

“There isn’t.”

“No. There’s no place on earth where you’d find that kind of emptiness.”

“Yes, there is, the desert where Christ was tempted. That was a place of such emptiness.”

“Where the Church was born,” I smile.

“You’re thinking of Ivan Karamazov, aren’t you?”

I feel ashamed of myself. The safety belt cuts into my chest, I can hardly breathe. I tap my fingers on my thighs. “Can one make a confession on the telephone?” I ask.

“Kosztolányi?”

I fall silent again.

“Where shall I put you down?”

“Wherever you like,” I say, and open the window.

Translated by Eszter Molnár
It was spring, late evening, and the radioactive rain was pouring down. Emma and Emőke walked either side of a nameless guy with their arms interlinked as they dragged the young psychiatrist through the centre of town like their catch. And that’s what he was, their catch: they came out of the concert on Ráday Street and managed to pull him away from three aggressive girls and the other members of the band and pull him into the unknown or rather Emőke’s place because the flat happened to be empty. Magda Feld was in the heart hospital, where, according to Emőke’s cynical take on things, Mum was training at altitude in preparation for her suicide attempt (then when her words proved to be a prediction in September, every last one of them came tumbling back down on Emőke’s head). But it was still only spring, late evening, and the three of them tramped along under the big, black umbrella belonging to the nameless young psychiatrist that their catch gripped tightly with both hands. He was the temporary front man for Dawn Abdominal Hyperaemia, the nameless young psychiatrist.

“My girlfriend needs a good shrink! She’s gone mad. She’s been running around in the rain all day. That right, Emma? Just look at her!” Emma had a large red patch on her face. She was cuddling a bottle of cheap brandy that she passed around every now and again but she showed no signs of its effects. She smiled as she gestured to the nameless young psychiatrist, don’t pay any attention to what Emőke’s saying, she’s the lunatic.

“She does it because she doesn’t want kids!” Emőke went on.
“She’s got a mother complex because her mum really is more beautiful than she is.”
“Man!” the nameless young psychiatrist whistled. “I’d like to see that woman!”
“You hear that? It was a complement!” Emőke whooped and carried on selling Emma. “You see, she wants to be a muse! But a really great muse. You know, like that woman… that Lou… that Lou… that Lou Andreas-Salomé, who started with Nietzsche, went onto Rilke and ended up with Freud. She runs around in the rain to make herself believe that she’d only ever have a disabled kid from all the radiation so she won’t have one after all and she can happily become a muse.”
“Emőke, sweetie,” Emma addressed her girlfriend, “a bit more respect.”
“I completely respect you, sister,” Emőke reassured here and then turned to the psychiatrist. “So, you see, she’s the muse and I’m her manager. A muse needs a manager, doesn’t she? You two can talk now.”
Emőke completely misunderstood the situation. Something completely unexpected happened to Emma: she went dumb. She simply couldn’t manage to speak in the presence of the nameless young psychiatrist. She just couldn’t find the words. This pleased her because for a while she thought she’d set her sights too high: there wasn’t a boy in this city who’d be good enough for her. (There should be at least four or five suitable men in her age group or that’s what she and Edit Perbáli had guessed.)
“You need a manager?!” the nameless young psychiatrist asked. Being as nothing came to her mind, Emma shrugged her shoulders: yes.
“Why, what do you do, besides being a muse, that is?”
“Guess!” Emma said, sticking her chest out and pulling a proud face. Because she was angry with herself for liking the nameless young psychiatrist and completely incapable of speech in his presence. Well, she could speak but couldn’t manage to say what she wanted which was that she never went to this kind of concert and she’d only come along this time to please her girlfriend who went by the name of Emőke Széles and was walking on the other side of the nameless young psychiatrist. They should be the ones talking to each other.
“You’re an artist,” the nameless young artist said with a condescending tone. “Am I right?”
“We’ve just told you that I’m a muse,” Emma wanted to say. “Didn’t you hear? I wrote a poem when I was sixteen and it had everything in it and I swear it was like someone dictated it to me. But then it turned out that I don’t actually have a mission in life, I’m not a genius, I’m no real talent, I’m nothing, I’m a student. But you’re not an artist either, you’re just a big nobody!”
“Yeah,” said Emma in a haughty tone in preference to this monologue.
“A life artist?”
“Ha-ha,” said Emma.
The nameless young psychiatrist started to explain to Emma that she wasn’t risking the life of her unborn child by running around in the rain. This rain wasn’t all that dangerous. The city was full of shock stories. Emma desperately wanted to respond by saying that her unborn children were none of his business but instead she told him to shut his umbrella if he dared. The nameless young psychiatrist shut his umbrella. Emőke Széles muttered something about stupid kids and opened her own.
“This what you wanted?” the nameless young psychiatrist asked. Emma wanted to come back at him with a sarcastic “So now you think you’re living dangerously?” But nothing actually came out of her mouth, which she managed to cleverly conceal with a timely pout.
“You’re think a lot of yourself,” the nameless young psychiatrist nodded. “You’ve got your own opinion about everybody.”
“Is that a problem?” Emma asked when she really wanted to say, “Right, I know. This is the part when you tell me that I’m a narcissist.”
“You can still just get away with it.”
“I should hope so!” Emma retorted but she really wanted to ask what it was she could still get away with. Surely not being a nar
cissist?! And what did he mean by ‘still just about’?! Was he trying to say something about her age?!

“Have you got such little self-confidence?” the nameless young psychiatrist attacked. “Do you really have to play the über girl?”

Emma had chatted to lots of boys and they nearly always ended up on the subject of her personality. And none of them had been psychiatrists. (There’d been the odd psychologist among them.) She’d never been out with anyone for longer than two weeks. She had no self-confidence. That’s why she couldn’t speak. Now she would have cut back at him with, “Guys like you who make a show of being so self-confident are the sort who end up joining some sort of cult.” But she didn’t cut back at him with anything. The über girl was pretty spot on. Her tongue paralysed again.

“Women like you,” the nameless young psychologist continued in a superior tone, “are the sort who end up joining some sort of cult! I don’t want to scare you.”

Emma wanted to respond to this by asking, “Where do you get the barefaced cheek to use phrases like ‘women like you’? ‘Women like you’ don’t exist! People exist. Do you have such a low opinion of people?! The fact that you’re used to having women fall at your feet and Nietzsche sticking out of your pocket in German doesn’t make you an artist however loud you shout into the microphone.” She was angry enough to have said that now but she didn’t want to flatter the nameless young psychiatrist and that would have qualified as flattery. Instead, all she said was,

“Why, what’s a woman like me like?”

“Pretty good,” the nameless young psychiatrist courted. “You just wear too much makeup and you think you’re the queen.”

“I don’t think, I know!” Emma exclaimed and for once this was what she wanted to say because this was what she wanted to think. Because she’d been insulted.

“Typical,” the nameless young psychiatrist chuckled.

“Because you’re not typical?!”

Emőke Széles peered out from under her umbrella with a smile of satisfaction as she witnessed their love affair beginning. At least that’s what she thought she was witnessing. In fact she was actually witnessing Emma being taken for ride. If she’d ever realised what she was witnessing, she’d never have tried to get them together. But she didn’t know. She sensed no danger. She thought that a free-speaking guy like this would do Emma some good because he’d get bored of her soon enough. (She also saw what appeared to be some sort of fellow feeling between Emma and Kornél of which she was a little wary.) It never occurred to her that the nameless young psychiatrist might fall for Emma or that perhaps he wasn’t as uninhibited as he first appeared.

It happened to be public knowledge that the nameless young psychiatrist would end up paralysed in the next couple of years. He wasn’t the only one in the city with such depressing prospects. Many other good-looking guys suffered similarly complaints (infertility, mind on the brink of insanity, schizophrenic episodes, etc.) and most of them made no secret of it. In fact, they complained to the women they met but always with a serious expression after a lot of obvious hesitation. They had their reasons. They wanted to prevent girls from tying their lives to them at the same time making girls feel sorry for them, which they really wanted. This is what the nameless young psychiatrist was also playing for. He wanted the best girls in the city to panic and line up for a chance with him before he was forced into a wheelchair for good. Emőke Széles reassured Emma with a clear conscience: she really didn’t have to take the nameless young psychiatrist seriously, he would only leave any woman he met because he wanted to experience life to the full because he’d soon be paralysed. The community they lived in, a couple of thousand people in the city (most of them young folks) readily spread the sad news. All threads seemed to somehow intertwine in the city. Everybody knew everybody from somewhere. (In fact, even vaguely before that.)

Emma and Emőke became friends because of smelly feet, which they both experienced as children but reacted very differently. They made Emma feel quite sick while Emőke couldn’t let them pass without a cutting comment which saw the owner of the
smelly feet throw her out of his flat. They were in the same year
and lived in similar circumstances (alone with a divorced mother)
and yet they still looked on each other with a degree of hostility for
the longest time although Emőke’s hatred started to wobble when
Emma turned up to a lecture entitled *Introduction to the Science of
Law* at the end of the first term in a powdered wig and crinoline
skirt she’d made herself. She admired Emma for her audacity but
she still kept her distance until the college outing when the sub-
ject of smelly feet came up along with the taste of a certain cake.
They were sitting in a wooden chalet in the Sopron campsite at
night and, as usual, Emőke Széles held the floor. She explained
why she never managed to learn French. Her mother found her
a French teacher who taught from home in the late afternoon.
The teacher came straight in from school where he’d been stand-
ing all day and could hardly wait to slip his shoes off. He sat at a
desk in his socks and stretched his feet out right under Emőke’s
nose who sat on the other side. His wife placed a plate of cakes
down on the desk and then left them to it. There wasn’t a smell
in the world that could have ever distracted Emőke Széles when
presented with crumbly cherry cake but they had cheese scones
for the third lesson and that was just too much to handle. Emőke
Széles had to pinch her nose to consume the scones. When the
teacher asked her why, she told him simply that she couldn’t stand
the smell of cheese. Then she couldn’t stop herself from taking a
sniff under the table and they threw her out.
“You’re just mad!” the others laughed. They liked Emőke Széles.
“We went to the same teacher!” Emma piped up who’d been read-
ing up until that point and only listening to the tale with half an
ear. She’d rushed home after the first lesson and told her mum
she couldn’t take the smell of feet. Edit Perbáli was unfamiliar with
the phenomenon even though she’d had private language les-
sions but a good twenty years earlier shortly after the middle of
the century. And the world was a very different place back then.
Her elderly French teacher sat at his desk in shoes. His lace-ups
were rather worn but polished to perfection. He wore an old but
otherwise immaculate dark suit with a bow tie. He was a gentle-
men from a previous age. So that’s the image Edit Perbáli had in
her head of a French teacher. She just nodded and found Emma
another French teacher, this time a woman but it still ended in
smelly feet. Sadly, Edit had no sense of humour, which would have
helped a lot in such a tragicomic situation, and so when Emma
came back from her second first class and said how sick she felt,
it led to an argument about what sort of pathetic individual her
daughter would become before Edit eventually slapped Emma
hard across the face and they both ended up in tears.
After a short and exited exchange, Emma managed to convince
Emőke that they were talking about completely different French
teachers and completely different smelly feet but by this time, the
rest of them had joined in. It turned out that three of the others
had come across the same situation: private teacher, late after-
noon, desk, smelly feet. And it soon transpired that this wasn’t
unique to those teaching the French language but occurred
across the curriculum. Smelly feet now acquired a social back-
ground and a historical depth because the reason lay undoubt-
edly in an impoverished state economy: for years on end, there
wasn’t an effective ointment available to treat athlete’s foot east of
the Elba where personal hygiene and frank expression were dying
out. Sitting around in the chalet in Sopron, this bunch of law stu-
dents didn’t get as far as the social background but this fleeting
recognition of their shared generational experience brought them
all that little bit closer together.
But by that time Emma and Emőke were far away, walking and talk-
ing in the dark Sopron night. Only the Iron Curtain blocked their
path or rather a couple of young border guards in a jeep patrolling
the Hungarian side of the nearby Austrian border. They gave the girls
a very sour telling-off for having entered a forbidden zone, threat-
ened them with legal proceedings but then, as could only happen
between two pretty students and two young border guards, the
boys smiled and gave the girls a lift back to the campsite.

*Translated by Ralph Berkin*
1. Starting Again

How wide the world is when we regard it from its smallest point. And how small, when we stand on the most famous point on the map. But where are such points? Where is the center of the world, and where does the world’s most remote city fall? I will tell you.

The center of the world lies in the direction of Bukovina, about midway; south of Galicia, east of Máramaros, and northwest of Moldavia rests a point beside the Tisza River. A straight road leads us there. If we approach through the Sub-Carpathian valleys and gorges, then it’s not far from the Aknaszlatina salt mines. We proceed by a road direct from Beregszász to Chernovitz. It’s doable by train in 17 hours, and in five to six by car or bus. We decide against the train, because it zigzags along just as history has zigzagged across the landscape, dividing the world into fortunate and unfortunate societies. Where the tracks run back and forth across the Romanian and Ukrainian sides, border guards stop us repeatedly, and during floods, railcars don’t move, and even buses and cars stand still. In divided Máramarossziget, at least seeing it through the window, today it seems there are no fortunate societies.

Between 1873 and 1913 the Military Geographical Institute of Vienna completed the first land surveys of the Habsburg Monarchy. During that time they charted out the altitudinal refer-
ence network. Here, beside the Upper Tisza, facing Mt. Barnabás, we find the center of Europe, but by other accounts the data was referring to the center of Central Europe. It’s true that even basic mathematical calculations don’t prove the existence of any center here; still, at the turn of the century, an obelisk was swiftly erected, bearing the following inscription: Permanent point of reference determined by a remarkably precise Austro-Hungarian Monarchy surveying level and in accordance with Europe’s degrees of longitude and latitude.

Of course, I wasn’t telling the truth; the road isn’t straight, but twisted. Whoever sets off from the center of the world will be astonished by how beautiful that world is. On the hilltops of the Apsas (Alsóapsa, Középapsa, Felsőapsa, Kisapsa) stand wooden churches, lined inside with soft carpeting, and as the traveler moves past them, she immediately comes to the small cemeteries beside the churches, then moves forward among rickety shacks, sees bridges reconstructed over the Tisza, and swerves between bunkers of the former Árpád line. The center of the world falls just between Mt. Barnabás and Terebesfejérpatak. If we go farther, leaving Rahó behind, then Kőrösmező, we come to the Black Springs, the source of the Tisza. Here the Tisza and the Tisza Valley end. Behind the 2000 meter high Mt. Csornahora, the Bukovina hills begin, the land of the Huculs and the Hasids, and the Szučsava and Szeret Rivers, and between them the once ploughed fields, then weeds, then crops. In five of its villages once lived the Székelys of Bukovina.

But let’s turn back to the mountains! The Hasids of the Cseremos forests were on to something. Once somebody said they were the true pessimists of the countryside, because whenever they predicted a catastrophe, they were proven right. We don’t hurry easily down the mountains, because something unseen stands in our way, though it must be there in the forest. When we look towards Csornahora, we see the Pop Iván mountains to the east. It is overwhelming to look up at the mystical mountain of those intuitive people. Mt. Pop Iván stands 2028 meters high, and god-fearing Greeks, Romans, Jews and Ruthenians were all once in its black ravines. In past centuries logging rafts departed for Kuty from here, and the Danube, and lumber was floated down as far as Szeged. Everyone who lives here knows what the mountains are saying; but for the time being, it remains a secret to us. There are precisely eighty-seven bends in the mountain road. Once a Hasid counted them. The road is fairly bumpy. If the bumps were to strike up and set off from Cseremos, the whole world would come to an end. We look up at the mountains with fear. An important man named Frank once lived here, who traveled far and wide, explains the Cseremos innkeeper in the notes of one of my books, but he said there’s no finer way to travel than touring this region by raft. Dus klärt er… We wouldn’t have thought people actually lived here, right? And it is stranger still that Jews lived here. Funt, the host, spent the whole night explaining to the travelers what a forest-dwelling Jew is.

We’re sitting on the bus exactly one hundred years later. We don’t come across a single raft or raftsman. The Tisza ripples, running in black and yellow swirls. Not too friendly. The road is just as predictable; a bridge comes close to crumbling beneath us, a wall caves in, shacks collapse. But no. Nothing collapses. A thin thread, a word, or some other support always arises to hold the story together. The host calmly, with gesturing hands and nodding head, tells us more. And whenever the bus takes a turn, I have to clutch him closer to make out what he’s saying. He’s telling an interesting story about a rafter from the forest who… But no. No one is here to talk. I look out the bus window, and I see there’s nobody here to tell me stories. The innkeeper and his inn are nowhere in sight, only the crumbling walls of the Cseremos cliffs. There’s nothing here. No people. No talking. Absolutely nothing.

As we go, we see the wildlife receding into the mountain landscape. Lynxes, wild boar and wolves vanish from the road. We reach desolate countryside, but the desolation, more than anything, originates in the souls, it can’t be seen in the curves of the
hills. The ravines are constant, whatever the weather, they endure. The landscape becomes a caricature of the soul, becoming more and more distorted as we progress. Anyone who’s here in spring can’t help but come up against the deluge. Again I remember the Jew who spoke of the deluge. On the road a few downed trees lie strewn about, here and there a shoveled ditch, loose asphalt, as though people were working on it. As though they wanted to pave the road. But it’s clear that nobody’s here. People sit in their Volgas and Moskviches, ride behind us for a stretch, following in our wake, then by our side for a couple hundred meters; they peer through their windows and dash past.

The rain is pouring.

Then all at once the mountains vanish, as though they had never been, as though we’d touched down in another world. The rain subsides. We can see Chernovitz on the other side of the Prut River. Vienna of the Prut. You can laugh, but it’s true. The name doesn’t remind many people of light, radiance, or luxury but, to put it vividly, black milk. Black milk is what Paul Celan called birth mingled with death. When trying to render palpable the reality of Bukovina, his place of birth and origin, Celan presumably wasn’t thinking of the once radiant metropolis he was born into in 1921, but rather the destruction and elimination of life that followed. The province of Bukovina is not simply a birthplace. I think it would be a mistake to call it that. Bukovina is everything and nothing. A place of many colors, many nationalities. Barren and fleeing, emptied of content. When you look at it, you see something, but there’s nothing there. Zero, point of origin. The center of the periphery. Central Europe’s unknown center. Yes, I believe there’s something here you could call a beginning and an end, and it is with us steadily as we travel.

On the most remote point of the world stands a city. We approach, we move closer, we’re extremely close, and we see how beautiful it is. We touch it, we enter, and see it for itself. But where’s the conclusion? That’s why you don’t have to travel there to know, but then again, you do. I believe everything can come of this bleak, superficial sight. Whoever sees the city will know immediately that he’s in an uncharted place.

2. Mayfly

Even in the best of cases, the most intensive trips are as short as the lifespan of a mayfly. They pass by so quickly, it’s as if they had never even happened. Oftentimes, from a remove, the ideal trip, which lasted for weeks and took years of preparation, seems shorter than it was. How is this possible? We think we know the world because we have traveled, when in reality we know nothing but the uneasy sense of how many corners of the world are still unknown to us. Well, the world will remain unknown. The traveler can think what he wants, and in any case only a few impressions remain. What are these impressions? They are the moments missing from the guidebooks. Let’s call them the moments of being there.

So then, let’s set out!

I have about fifty photos in front of me that I took in the Sub-Carpaticians and Chernovitz. They lie spread out on the table. Was I really there where I took these pictures? I’m not so sure. Now that the trip has ended, I see more than what I saw behind the camera. There’s so much in the photos I didn’t notice with the naked eye. All sorts of things are in them. I needed a little time before realizing what I could have seen in reality and what I only imagined was there. Most pictures are dark, the contours blurred, melting into one another. This is the unknown and until now barely explored or simply forgotten countryside revealing its surrealism in these photographs of the land. Perhaps these photos are the only way to prove the countryside exists.

I have a bunch of photos in front of me here, which only a few other people will see. (They didn’t come out too well. A few are completely blurry, as though the lens had been wet.) For the most
part what I captured are impressions. There are strong brown and gray tones, with a little green showing through here and there, and dashes of yellow and blue in the pictures of the Tisza. The pebbles are light, and the debris strewn about on the pebbles blue, green and gray. In one photo you can see a black skull set on a tin cross. The skull’s sockets are white, just like the bones. Szucsava blue shows up in the photos taken inside churches, and these are perhaps the vivid colors of the Bukovina monasteries. Saint Stephen’s and the Virgin Mary’s garments are also blue on the wall decoration in the church of Kőröszmező. Jesus’s eyes are usually sky blue. The red embroidery comes out clearly on the Easter vestments I photographed. The longer we stare at the photographs, the more layers we discover. If I wave back the mist, Chernovitz, the final destination of our trip, is truly radiant. At the end of the roll come pictures of the gravestone portraits. Only later do I realize that water appears in every picture, without exception, be it the bank of the Tisza, which constantly cuts across our way, or elsewhere, in the fields, anywhere, everywhere we go. The river becomes an obstacle, it doesn’t even look like a river, with all the dams built up around it. The dams are erected, and during floods they immediately collapse. The Tisza is our main escort. But it is uncontrollable, and in this sense it ruins every trip, and we had to struggle with it through to the end. Come spring, the river is by no means just a trickling stream, and the light reflecting off its water doesn’t just dazzle the eye. At this time in spring the river’s presumed innocence disappears, and it becomes a calculating and evil force of destruction. Perhaps in summer it returns to its more attractive and pure self. But during the trip and in the pictures of it, we’re helpless against it. The Tisza. Once it almost swept our bus away entirely. However we look at it, the river seems to have strayed onto the road and marshes in the spring torrents. Somewhere up in the Carpathians it leaves its sources, the Black and White Springs, and swells into an unwieldy adult. The many week long, incessant rainfall forces the river to leave its banks. In retrospect the Tisza was neither an infant, nor a beautiful, mature woman, but a destructive adolescent.

3. Water

There’s water wherever we go. We can see it through the rain. Everything is damp: the houses, the people’s coats, the grass beside the churches, the boards of the wooden bridges, the gardens and the narrow pastures. Torrential rainfall probably means spring to the locals. For nearly two weeks the water didn’t let up for a moment. After two days it was like taking a trip in an aquarium. (That same year, that summer, a couple of months later, sixty percent of Romania lay underwater, and the people were powerless in the face of it. In the news footage the downpour washed away houses, villages and roads.) The pictures I took in Chernovitz got wet because, as I seem to recall, no, I remember perfectly well, it was raining when I developed them, and they got wet.

Writing and water have a lot in common. The struggle to record a trip is similar to the struggle of a river fisherman. Without the fisherman everything would flow along as usual, because he has no say in what the river does. But even so he does interrupt, because he scoops out what he needs for himself, no more than what is needed for the description. My travel companions are there in the pictures too, but I’ve forgotten them. Perhaps later they’ll turn up here. I still don’t know, I have no idea how the trip will take shape. Chernovitz exists. I saw it, took pictures of it, and I show them to anyone who asks. I show them to anyone who doesn’t ask. Like a correspondent among soldiers: you didn’t know it existed, right, I ask, and I present the proof, like clues to a crime. As though I knew what was happening on the other side of the front. Though I know absolutely nothing; I just went somewhere and came back from somewhere.
To enter Chernovitz, first you have to climb the hill it rests on and then manage to scale the walls of the city. Coming from Hosszúmező we cross the Prut River, pass the train station, then, as we come deeper and deeper into the crumbling walls of the city, the crumbling walls have been painted white, cobblestones appear on the street. Once we feel like we’ve flown a hundred years back in time, we’re definitely not just fantasizing. We’ve arrived. Here we are, standing in the center of town.

Chernovitz shoulders a more weighted existence than other Bukovina cities like Szucsava, Szeret, Radóc, Kimpolung, or the old royal Mármaros towns of Visk, Huszt, Técső and Mármarossziget. It’s the center of the region, a true metropolis, complete with a theater, market, university, Episcopal See and countless weathered traces of history. If someone knows the city from written descriptions and memoirs, in reality it will seem much smaller. On the outskirts, Zadagóra is the capital of Hasidism, and possibly it’s more renowned than any other great European city. If we wanted to read the city, it would require years. But wandering and touring its entirety can be done in a day.

In short, it poured the whole time. Usually my mouth gets dry when I go to the remote corners of the world. Fluids would certainly help, but we can only drink at the end of the trip. I often think how good it would be to turn back, go home, slip into bed and think about the trip under the sheets. Reaching Chernovitz is like running a distance, but no, as if a long-distance runner stopped just before the finish line, because the meaninglessness of running had suddenly dawned on him. Finish line? This trip had no finish line, no destination. All of our belongings were soaked through. The rain is pounding against the roof of my attic room. The sound of rain against wood accompanies the thunder of the computer keys. My eyes tear up, though I’m not usually moved by raindrops. I don’t understand what a city and a soul have to do with one another.

### 4. Real Travel

Actually a city and a soul can have a lot in common. The name of a city can come to mean encounter, love and murder, but can also come to mean devastation, self-destruction. Yet the name of a city can mean radiance, shop windows, the center of town, itself as an object of desire, but it can also mean solitude, and it can mean company. Rome is such a city. Jerusalem too. Paris and Budapest. These days more and more people would also add Berlin and Cracow. A city’s name means a place of birth and death. Tedium and excitement. Penalty and reward. Don’t think for a minute that we can only see the punishment of unfortunate societies in Chernovitz. There are moments of happiness in Chernovitz, if only in the form of a raindrop. But happiness there can also be found in a drop of paprika vodka. Happiness assumes a thousand faces.

We set off in the spring of 2005. We started in the direction of where we were headed, though we could just as well say that we set off in a multitude of directions. Чернівці, Czernowitz, Cernauti, Csernovic… This was two years after my first trip to Bukovina, when I went to Bukovina’s Romanian part with an anthropology group. This trip and this account are therefore sequels. Not repetition, but continuation, since it’s not possible to travel to the same place twice. The travelers sitting on the bus came from the same university in Eastern Hungary. For the most part they were the same faces as two years ago and they were shadowed by the same words, drinks, relationships, break-ups, observations and issues as then. From the moment we boarded the bus, it was clear that everyone was captive to the impressions of two years ago. There was no common anthropological framework. Everything depended on individual interpretation. If the interpreter happened to suffer from an upset stomach, thirst or hunger, then the description of the trip would be altered by these experiences. In short, the interpreter is not necessarily a social individual, so there is no one particular interpretative community on the bus. (It’s better to travel like this.) We’re not on a class trip either,
but just here to observe, to find what we had once given up and which they said doesn’t exist, can’t be seen and can’t be photographed either.

The unrelenting rain makes the travelers more patient, and their sleepy expressions make them look humble. Pssst, the bus is asleep. We’ve boarded, everybody’s finally here, even the girls who are always late, those who were out dancing last night. We can set off. Our guide hasn’t forgotten anything. In fact, we can all thank him for the trip. Our trips with him are well-planned and provide true evidence of cultures and objects we thought had vanished. Back in Hungary our Travel Guide, Z. I., distributes maps and statistics on the religion and nationality breakdowns for the towns we’ll be passing through. He makes sure we receive only objective data. The bus doesn’t interpret anything without information, doesn’t judge, follows nothing and nobody. For the whole trip it moves forward, gets gas and drinks, if thirsty, that is all. The bus takes care of itself. If it sees a large pothole on the road, stray donkey or dog, wobbling bicyclist, or another car run into and drowned in a ditch, the bus reaches out its arms and helps. Our Travel Guide, Z. I., calls back to us, and we help those in need. But how heartless the same travelers are when they see floods or begging gypsy children clinging to the windshield. Then everything reverses, and they won’t leave the bus.

At Beregsurány we cross the border. From Beregszász we head towards the Tisza. At Huszt we turn towards the main road on the Tisza’s left bank, and from then on we follow the river, crossing through Técső and Rahó until we reach Kőrösmező. On the way we only had to wait two hours at the border, thanks to the high-ranking military connections of a contemporary Hungarian writer, L. B. But gas, cigarette, vodka smugglers have more clout than us, the well-connected literary types. Smugglers take more trips than writers and do more fieldwork than anthropologists. There’s no greater pleasure than finally arriving in Kőrösmező, tired and tipsy after crossing the border. The whole bus smiles when Olga waves, letting us know we’ve arrived. Yes. During the long trip, the travelers, the community, had almost forgotten where they were headed. Without Olga waving, we would have had no idea where we were headed. This is how the world staggers along.

The next day we visited the local museum and saw Lenin, Stalin, the Huculs, and 806 antique Hungarian household tools still in use here today. A large portion of Kőrösmező’s population was settled here in the 16th and the 19th century from Galicia, Bukovina, Transylvania and Hungary. In the beginning, the Huculs were herdsmen, and later they became known for their daring and bravery: they were foresters floating timber and rafting. They could float wood from Csornahora all the way to Chernovitz, and there were even those who regularly floated to Szeged by raft. We slept in the former Budapest Hotel. The hotel was built in 1940, at the time of the reannexation of Transylvania. A Hucul-style three-story wooden building. The town’s shield was inlaid in the former ballroom, where we had dinner. And one night here, in this room, the Hungarian male anthropologists filled the female anthropologists’ mouths with vodka from a glass shotgun. But that’s not how it was. I should write instead that every day we ate meat and potatoes and with dinner we drank tea in the inlaid dining hall.

Only later do I discover we had been staying in a place of unrest. Right below our window the Black Tisza and the Mezőhát Stream flowed past. This, of course, wasn’t the source of unrest. When we head towards the valley of Mezőhát Stream on the main road, we can climb up through the crags to Tatar Pass. During World War II the mountain ridge was an ever-changing border line: first Czech-Polish, then Hungarian-Polish and later Hungarian-Soviet. At the end of 1918, when the Galician Ukrainians were free from Habsburg rule, here, beneath our window they declared the Hucul Republic of Kőrösmező, shortly after Kőrösmező was annexed to Czechoslovakia. And from this same spot in 1941 they deported the incoming “displaced Jews” from Galicia to the Kamenetz-Podolsky region and killed them there.

The events have been obscured in a mystic fog. Today there’s vodka in the shotguns. And there are no memorial tablets. Not
long ago the Huculs, too, played a role in the Orange Revolution, Olga said, well, we’re waiting for a miracle. Yushchenko’s not getting anything done in time, and Kiev is far away, maybe life is better there. We woke up early. The downpour joining the Tisza stirred up a lot of noise. As the fog lifted, we moved on. Olga came along with us. We, the community, stared, amazed. Should I tell you when? The next day, after an approximately 5-hour trip from Kőrösmező, we saw Paris. And then we saw Vienna. We didn’t understand how we had ended up in Budapest while in Ukraine. So Chernovitz does exist. No longer on the bus, not circling in our heads, we’re no longer just imagining it. There it is, standing right in front of the bus’s nose, showing itself to the travelers. Like an elderly woman who again and perhaps for the last time shows us her old but beautiful teeth and unwrinkled skin. There the city stands before the nose of the bus. This old and new, Austrian, Yiddish, Ukrainian and Romanian city, where the dusted off foundations of a culture are visible, and where, if you turn to the walls, you can still blow off dust. Here we are, strolling in the former capital of the province of Bukovina. We visit the train station, the theater, the German and the Jewish community houses, we go into Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish places of worship, and in the end we head away from the one-time Eastern Orthodox cathedral towards today’s university buildings.

5. Yellowed Hills

The previous trip, which I called “Bukó”, ended here, as we came to Klimauci, a little village of the Lipovans. Then we had to turn back, because we had reached the border stretching between Ukraine and Romania. We climbed up into the tower of church ruins and, from here, we looked across to the other side, in the direction of Galicia, and we imagined we could see all the way to the Dniester River. We marvelled at the vast nothingness. Which was just as frightening over there as here. The border didn’t make a difference. In this country, Bukovina’s hilly landscape was just as yellowed and melancholy as it was over there, in that country. Here, there, the land, the crops and the faces are furrowed. After two years of longing and anticipation, we’ve come to the place we could only see from the tower, where everything had been sharper and clearer. Now I don’t see anything when I’m in Bukovina.

Is this really Chernovitz?

We are somewhere else, and it’s as if we were home. The corners of this former Habsburg city are familiar; the buses, the cobble-stone streets, the theater and coffeehouses are not at all foreign, they were recovered from the vacuum following the bombings. The hill built up on the bank of the Prut is more than just a hill, it’s a whole period. The Hungarian traveler can navigate here and there on the familiar streets. The traveler has to orient herself using maps in two or often three languages. She looks at a facade, a balcony, a museum entrance, and she knows where she is. Every city is different, but the difference can’t be found in the buildings or the fashionable commentaries on style. You can only grasp the difference through impressions.

We wander using an old book, because everything is nearly the same as it was then. When we blow the dust off the Ukrainian street signs, we can see the German street names. We use the Illustrierte Führer Baedeker to tour the Habsburg period cityscape point by point. A few things aren’t in their places: the statue of Schiller and Schiller Park, the famous Pieta in front of City Hall, the Eastern Orthodox Archbishop’s palace, the Vienna Coffeehouse, the bookstores, the Chernovitz Morgenblatt debates, Der Nerv journal’s avantgarde poets, Paul Celan’s fugues, Karl Krauss’s editorials, Sperber’s books, Gregor von Rezzori’s memoirs or Karl Emil Franzos’s Half-Asia; Ring Platz and Austria Platz, Siebenbürger Strasse, Enzenberg Hauptrasse. These are nowhere. What isn’t there we imagine there, so that it can still somehow exist.
6. Unreal City

During the day the cities and towns of Bukovina lack lyricism. An unpleasant feeling descends on us from the direction of the hills, skutchno blankets the cities. Skutchno is heartache. I should describe the people of Bukovina. During the day they barely seem alive, or at least in the hills they don’t appear to be living. Desire almost imperceptibly turns into skutchno, they are dulled by a vast tedium and pain, which overpowers any drive. And so it’s said that at night they see their wishes realized in their dreams. And what do people dream about here? We cannot know this. A dream is a secret. A secret is a secret. You cannot know what or who that secret is. You can’t know what’s concealed. Perhaps nothing, perhaps something, perhaps the world beyond Bukovina. The nature of the secret itself renders discoverers unnecessary. Therefore here even the traveler becomes someone without desire, somebody irrelevant, who can freely move anywhere, eyes and attention fluttering over the land, but who can change nothing. Irrelevance itself is the most beautiful feeling here, which is why the people of Bukovina are happy.

Gregor von Rezzori, the famous émigré writer of the province, called Bukovina’s turn of the century train stations, houses and courtyards the illusions of civilization. In the same way he retouched the ways of the hillside nobility too with a landscapist’s brush, and he laid down a new coat of paint, the shadow of illusion, onto everything and everyone. Only market days let people forget their skutchno-blanketed, melancholy uncertainties. Actually, the markets are important in Half-Asia, if not the most important social and economic events, and alone are capable of stirring life into the people, even stirring up the whole province of Bukovina. Chernovitz’s famous markets are still running today.

We stopped by a smaller market, a fascinating sight: plastic shoes made in China, brand-name bags, military coats, cassettes and porn videos, the latest Star Wars, medication, vegetables, turkeys, painted eggs, Hucul pots and pans, sick cats, books, screws, fuses. Skutchno accompanied us throughout the whole trip, just as it had two years ago. I envisioned skutchno in many forms: as a stray pregnant dog who had moved into the bus’s baggage compartment, wanting to bring her puppies into the world on a Volán bus; then as mangy horses waving as we drove past them, their bridles stretching and their stride quickening, hoping we might take them away with us; then in a fur cap, drunk, on a bike; a pretty young girl’s soot-black dress; or simply clinging to the glass of the bus window as mildly appealing pear-shaped raindrops, wanting to come with us.

How reliable it is to travel in this direction, somebody said, because nothing changes.

And then suddenly comes Romanticism. Neo-Baroque and Neo-Classicism. The handprints of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt in the theater and the beds where they once slept in Hotel Moldavia on Holowna Street. Greek mythology featured in the theater’s reliefs. The Viennese architect Otto Wagner’s buildings. But above all the Jugendstil train station, the work of more Viennese architects, the famous Chernovitz theater, the Judicial Palace, City Hall, churches, high schools, the hospital, and the once enchanting Episcopal palace, today home to the university. In 1905 a traveler wrote that one could drink coffee from Hamburg and put lemons from Trieste into tea in Chernovitz’s Vienna Coffeehouse. But let’s not replace social realism with a false nostalgia. On the spot where the Pieta formerly stood on Marktplatz there was a Lenin memorial, which we (unfortunately?) can no longer see, because it disappeared in 1991. Currently there’s nothing on the square, except for the braided hair of the beautiful and tough Ukrainian prime minister, Tymoshenko, on a poster. The art museum and the bank are beside the square. Skutchno’s freshest faces are these busy buildings and the gaps between them, empty spaces, the synagogue built between 1873 and 1877 on what was formerly called University Street. According to my book it was once like an Arabian tale. Today no one would say this. Of the city’s forty-six synagogues, one was reopened not long ago, and the others they
converted into movie theaters, apartment buildings, and department stores.

Two years later spiritual emptiness is still emptiness, it just has a different effect. When we look at this guarded city, the West of the East, we no longer get our souls mixed up in it. We just stand and look, and the whole time, from the first moment to the last, Chernovitz is the joining of two memories. As I sit here now and try to approximate what I saw, I feel this city is like a photo of an impression that can be developed at any time. While we look, what immediately gets stirred up in us is a desire to see the turn of the century. But this is a deceptive desire; it would be a deception to look at Chernovitz as though it were a turn of the century city. In the last hundred years everything has changed, and those who live here are not interested in talking about the coffeehouses. Chernovitz, the Wien on the bank of the Prut, was in fact built on hills. I willingly believe it, though they weren’t that big, the hills. Our long-distance bus from Miskolc climbs them easily. I know the hills are there, because I stood on them. Everybody stood there, they had to, because we departed an hour late. In Chernovitz time passed quickly, and we didn’t have time to listen to the people. Meanwhile I’ve realized that the photos of the town are wet because the Prut River and the tears of the people appear in them. I don’t know if this true or not, but I do know I saw them, or if I didn’t, then I imagined them there, or if I can’t even imagine them anymore, I’ll write it down here: I saw tears.

7. Der Friedhof or We’ve Come to Bury

It’s not that great to be German, just as it’s by no means so great to be Székely! And in Bukovina it’s certainly not great to be Jewish! So then what is it best to be? It’s best to be dead.

In the course of history, foreigners pillaged the province of Bukovina countless times. They pillaged, but they also gave to the area. By the 19th century, the different communities living here had transformed it into a place of tolerance.

My travel guide—a slick, new volume I picked up not too long ago at the Örs Vezér Square Mall in Budapest, written by a girl and a boy who came here a few years ago—points out the three most interesting things to see: the Museum of Fine Arts, for its Secessionist style, Chernovitz University, for its blend of Eastern Byzantine and Western Renaissance styles, and the cemetery. One of the largest cemeteries in Central Europe is situated on the city’s eastern outskirts, in the former Vorstadt Kaliczanka. A wide road cuts the cemetery in two. The Jewish cemetery is on one side, and on the other side we find all sorts of people from the Habsburg Monarchy: Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic graves. And what connects the two sides? The portraits. Almost without exception, every gravestone has a photograph of the dead.

In part the book is right, though in part it isn’t, because neither during the Monarchy nor today did these people form either the unified groups or the separate units they do here, in the cemetery. The old Chernovitz cemetery today is no longer an organic part of the city. The Jewish cemetery is all but abandoned, almost as if it didn’t even exist, as if the cemetery belonged to the dead, instead of the living. But the cemetery belongs to the living.

We enter.

Everything is upside down. It’s a wretched feeling going to cemeteries, someone says and holds his hand up in front of his eyes. There are those who don’t even realize they’re walking among ruins, because they are captivated by the huge Expressionist graves and sporadic synagogue-sized graves. There is stone everywhere. What a titillating feeling to tread on the lives and bodies of others. To read their lives in under three seconds. We can determine a lot from the dates, though, of course, we can’t determine everything. Red stars and Stars of David appear side by side on the post-war graves. There’s an enormous portrait of a woman. Somebody didn’t want her interred only as a Communist. In World
War II fifty thousand Chernovitz Jews were killed. She was presumably among the few thousand survivors who didn’t emigrate to Israel in 1948. We are afraid of death, yet on the faces of all the cemetery visitors sits a kind of titillated excitement. As if we were solving a crossword. What we see in the cemetery barely exists and soon will disappear without a trace, because the graves are in extraordinarily bad condition. We are standing caught in a crossword column that cannot be completed. Overgrown little hands of liana clutch at most of the graves, we search between the tree branches and bushes, and there are places into which we simply cannot fit. On the stones there’s a mosaic of names from the past: Zucker and Zuckermann, Mr. and Mrs. Zwilling, rose and almond, Franzos and Antschel. Hier ruht die Mutter. Hir mein Sohn und mein Mann. Hier bin ich. Hier werde ich ruhen. Hier sind my mother. Here my son and my husband. Here I rest. Here is where I will die. (Where did you die? In Michalka, in a camp?)

“What a huge head that woman has,” everyone says who sees my cemetery photos, without exception. This grave is like a temple. Everyone marvels at how there could be, or excuse me, how there could have been such a world. But it existed and is still visible. Huge heads, heads of little girls, portraits of husbands and wives, portraits of children, smaller statues of victims, epitaphs, epitaphs, epitaphs. In Hebrew, German, Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian. Chernovitz is a necropolis. If Bukovina is the land of books, as Celan said, then Chernovitz is the land of photographs. We need the help of a mechanism to develop the cemetery portraits. There’s somebody here. I almost forgot him. The host. What was it he said about the forester?

“The Jew of the forest, my dear gentlemen, is someone to whom the name Rothschild doesn’t say much. If you will excuse me, it says absolutely nothing. The name of Jura’s son, Mikola Halamasuk, however, said a lot. Everything. Because Mr. Rothschild is datsch. Halamasuk was my neighbor. I bought a cow from him, actually. And what a cow! Every day we talked to him. And they talked to us. But don’t you believe for a moment that I don’t know what elegance is! I know thanks to Mr. Stanisławow, who put on a new clean silk shirt every morning. Well, and where did it get Mr. Rothschild? That famous datsch?! He put on a new shirt three times a day, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Yes, really! How dreadfully inconvenient! And then what about our splendid lord, the Czar, His Majesty? Perhaps at every moment he’s taking off and putting on a shirt—ha, ha, ha. What a terrific hassle. You see, I know everything,” laughed the host. “But come on in.” Anyway, he told us it wasn’t so good, being German. It was much better to be a poor forest Hasid in Cseromos. The best was to hide away from the world altogether. To stand on the smallest, most remote point in the world. That was the best by far.

Miskolc-Chernovitz, April 28–May 1, 2005

Translated by Rachel Miller
At least that’s what was said by those who’d he told the same. It really isn’t my intention to make him into some kind of hero here in order to make it appear that I posses the same skill, which—I hope—I have inherited. And, anyway, he beat his wife, drank heavily and swore like a trooper. Despite all of this, I am confidently able to say that he could actually fly because he was the kind of man who called a spade a spade except when he called it a shovel although that was where his sophistication ended. So, you see, he really did fly. He wasn’t one for metaphors, damn and blast! (One time, he invited the bishop to the village and a miracle occurred: they say that he said that he couldn’t fly on that day.) The folks in the village quickly got used to the idea—it was common knowledge and people would often say, without prompting: ‘Lukács flew in the night!’ No one ever saw him fly; some of the old blokes say that they used to see him drinking at a place known simply as ‘The Pub’ much more often in the old days (‘Alcoholic Beverages in Large Measures’ was written in bold type over the door), or in the fields where he would workup the cash during the day to drink in the pub at night. Whatever the case, they were all convinced that he could fly because of the convincing way he told them. (There must have been something in the tone he used because it seems silly when you see it written on the printed page.) No one ever dared look him in the eye and tell him it was all a
bunch of lies. He was a temperamental type, a difficult man who always carried a stash of tobacco in a leather pouch and a tot of plum brandy in a hollowed-out bull's horn (strictly for emergencies) as well as a knife slipped into the top of his boot. It was a real knife mind, no penknife. If ever there was a knees-up, the blood was sure to flow and the butchered individuals (along with their guts slithering in a bowl) were quickly carried by a gang of men to the hospital that stayed open to dawn on such exceptional evenings. Anyone who lived to tell the tale didn't as much as look in his direction ever again. He smoked the roughest tobacco, drank brandy of undeterminable origin and his knife sliced with the precision of a scalpel—he operated like a kind of surgeon in reverse.

So no one ever dreamt of telling him that he was a rotten liar although they could have: by the time he started to spread the story that he had been able to fly for years and years, he was well into his sixties, only smoked cigarettes that he broke in half, his liver was pushing its way through his belly wall and he generally only ever used his knife when he needed to peel an apple.

They still refused to laugh out loud because country folk have good memories and they just supped their drinks in silence. “Get off home, Lukács, the wifely moan,” “I’ll fly,” and other such crappie one-liners were as far as it ever got. But this was serious drinking taken to its limits; all of them could do something out of the ordinary: lift a cow, scale a summit, swallow cinders and those who had no tale of their own to tell could all recall that my granddad could fly.

It was only his sons who had left to work in town who couldn’t be convinced when we paid them a visit; they said it was all stuff and nonsense. This would turn my granddad’s eyes bloodshot with fury and he’d flutter around the house all night long and I’d hide scared under the blankets because the effort made him puff and pant and sawdust rained down on my face from between the beams over my bed. I never dared to look and check to see if he was really flying out there but even if I had, something always seemed to be blocking out the moon and even though I could hear his snores coming from quite close by, I knew that he was circling the chimney.

The next morning it was always light again and he was out chopping wood for the fire, smoking half a cigarette, mumbling as he rubbed his belly at about liver height and peeling me apples from the tree. The old man never spoke to me.

It was only the next day that I would hear in the village: "Lukács was out flying again last night!" They didn’t sound shocked when they said it but they didn’t sound all that relaxed either. And they never said it to me in person but to each other, over the fence, whispering and checking to see that they weren’t being overheard.

The men were still much more wary of his skill with a knife than they were of his aerial antics. Many of them carried the stitches in their bellies to prove it and their wives would stroke their scars on lonely nights and think back to the days when Lukács wooed them all and won them.

They too knew that he flew at night but unlike the men-folk they thought it was thrilling and they’d giggle as they gossiped about it. I guess this must have hurt their husbands.

The council didn’t bother with him either: they were all superstitious, local boys in that place who could still remember slaving in the fields with the triumphant Lukács and how scared they were of him back then. He, on the other hand, had stayed as poor as ever and didn’t sit at the same table but he could have handled any one of them if called on to do so. The council didn’t bother with him either: they were all superstitious, local boys in that place who could still remember slaving in the fields with the triumphant Lukács and how scared they were of him back then. He, on the other hand, had stayed as poor as ever and didn’t sit at the same table but he could have handled any one of them if called on to do so. 

But there was never any question of such a thing happening. The village operated in a singularly incestuous manner: orders arrived from headquarters, mostly by mail, and the rest was left up to the locals. Everything went like clockwork: the threshing machine was
made public property, fences came down and former farmhands got ink on their fingers.

Lukács had nothing worth commandeering—because that’s the word they used to describe what they spent most of their time doing—though they still called him in but he never went.

The truth was that folks would have given him their worldly belongings much more readily, he frightened them and his commanding presence would have saved many yards of good rope and fewer children would have been left as orphans if he had said: “I think we’ll have to take this, Elek, but I promise you’ll get it back if we live to see the day!”

Though he still never went and I’m not sure why. It wasn’t out of principle and neither was it laziness: these two phenomena were unheard of in those parts. Great principles and great ideas were never born because they were stifled by the booze pressed from sour grapes and, of course, the brandy. As for idleness, it wasn’t a luxury that local farmers or their kin allowed themselves or each other.

It could only be done by someone with great humanity and this made the people of the village respect him even more. Everyone believed him and his three friends, flying, cinder-eating and all.

“Just who are you, Lukács?” asked a young bloke, in the old days, with tears in his eyes and his hands pressed to an oozing stab wound.

“I am who I am!” he replied before stabbing him again.

“He was, in truth, a cruel and merciful God, a law unto himself and a man of great vision,” is how the vicar described him when he locked the church doors after the funeral.

They flooded the village the next day and not a living soul remained. They say that the ones who dared to venture back swore they saw an apparition flying over the lake that stopped every now and again and just hovered.

He knew that it would be only a matter of minutes before the question was asked. “Christa?”

He made a broad sweep with his hand. “She’s working! Her thousand-page book has just been published. The history of religion in Russia…” His tone managed to combine sarcasm and accusation with understanding just as it had when I was the topic of conversation.

Academics, he said, you know. Their kind are forever working and can’t stand it when someone they live with does nothing all day but smoke cigarettes and stare into space. Sooner or later such behaviour is guaranteed to bring on a fit of hysterics. And now he always had paper at hand and quite recently, after a night spent arguing, he wrote out Reviczky’s poem, Death of Pan, that he always liked as a child and could still recite from memory. Of course, he made sure to pace himself so that it took the whole of the afternoon with a great deal of erasing, crossing-out, rewriting and correction. He might well still be at it if he hadn’t realised that he was doing practically the same as a famous footballer had when he was sent to the World Peace Congress and ended up writing swearwords on a receipt so everyone would think he was paying attention and taking notes. In other words, he and Christa still experienced the same kind of Ingeborg-Holm-and-Tonio-Kröger tension between them, which he would never feel if he were with a black woman or a Japanese girl. It was then that he mentioned Bob Wilson’s black actress for the first time.
who nursed him, cooked and cleaned for him when he had pneumonia in Paris and Christa was with her husband in Bremen. The actress was the one he wanted to call from his hotel in Sevastopol between six and seven.

“I hope I can find the number…” he muttered as he searched through his pocketbook and gave a tired sigh. “What is this place? Nothing in Europe has any integrity left. Perhaps Ireland, Poland. Maybe the English countryside? I don’t know. Maybe even Transylvania. This is place is more like Lillafüred blown up to the size of Berlin. I think this is it…I’m off!”

He waved goodbye with an expression plummeted to freezing point so typical of a depressive and his mood swings. It was as if he’d wiped me from the blackboard of his view with a wet sponge: he was still looking but he couldn’t see me anymore.

I watched the revolving door continue to spin after him and I was sure that only Ali and Piroska would make it to the film screening in the concert hall at the Pupp Hotel because Laci would be drinking in the bistro then stumbling through the woods where he’d most likely end up losing the middle button on his jacket that was only hanging on by a thread.

I was just drifting off to sleep in the spa hotel later that night when I suddenly thought of that button. If he does lose it, he’s bound to turn back to look for it. And he’ll spend hours searching, staring into the darkness and patting the earth and the dewy grass in the vague hope of stumbling across it. This wasn’t because he was so pedantic but because he’d been drinking and he’d be totally ruled by the guilt of his childhood that he had experienced during the summer vacation when he was supposed to be on holiday but actually staying in a castle operating as a correctional institution, where his mother-superior aunt asked a young prostitute to account for a lost needle, thimble or length of cotton, which the sinner had in effect received from God, and which she should have guarded as if it were a fragment of holy wafer. This guilt will come back to him and grow into panic on the woodland walk as he gropes around on the ground and fingers the scar in the fab-
ric until he almost feels it bleed. He'll end up lost like a blind dog thrown from a night train searching for its master who, by some mysterious twist of fortune, has turned into a jacket button.

But if this is true, I thought with surprise, then what’s the difference, where’s the boundary, how much more important is it for him what he felt towards some unattainable girls from the past, or what binds him to Christa now?

Or even our friendship?

When he was at Valsainte a couple of years ago, he took photos of the graveyard at Karthuzy Monastery with its black and nameless crosses barely visible though the fine muslin mist and he gave me a print that hung all alone on the wall of my room until it was joined a picture if a bronzed young woman sunbathing in a tiny bikini.

He told me all about it when he got back from Valsainte.

“You know they normally tell all the new arrivals, ‘Out there in the world, everyone only ever thinks of themselves. Don’t you believe them when they tell you that everyone here lives for the others! No. The truth is that only one Somebody is important to us.’”

From this perspective, it no longer appeared ludicrous to see friendship as a button about be lost. Neither ours nor that he held with others. Not even his lovers. In fact the opposite, it was now obvious that he was really nothing more to me than an acquaintance. And he was that to everybody including those whom he regularly laughed at because they hurt him.

He stopped smoking for several months after his visit because he would have liked to return to the monastery.

“This is the most difficult part for me,” he said in the coffee bar when I blew the smoke right under his nose because he made a such a play out of saying I wasn’t to worry, he wasn’t the least bit bothered, people could smoke as much as they wanted. “If a man can drop the habit after thirty years of smoking two packets of cheap fags a day then maybe he can start to have faith in himself.”

He was still dizzy from a lack of nicotine a good six months later but he kept it up. That was until he met Christa at a conference in Poigny just outside Paris whom he photographed the following summer in the overgrown garden of a villa in Óbuda and the image was just as beautiful as the monastery graveyard. He sent me a copy of that one too because he claimed I was the one who helped him realise that the beautiful young body draped on a sun-lounger was strangely reminiscent of a carved form on a grave. I didn’t help him. If anything, the opposite was true. It irritated me the way that he was always staring at the picture while my words appeared unimportant to him. Then I’d only just got home and he called me to say that he was writing a play about the photograph and he wanted to read me the first line because he’d got that far already. It was something about the model’s face looking like the face of a young soldier. But it didn’t. However, it was true that the first woman he ever desired was a soldier and she’d been actively serving in the SS until a couple of days before they met, but being Estonian she was classified as a political refugee in the American zone. She’d been snuggled up in a haystack not far from the fence of the Frankfurt racetrack, and Laci, a former gunner who no more deserved to be locked up, slumped down next to her in the field. He did this with the kind of hopeless and uninhibited ease of a smelly tramp joining another for a quick nap or a couple of swigs. Why should he feel inhibited by such a genderless creature as a girl? This is how he accepted the moist and sparkling lump of chewing gum from her that she later asked back and carried on chewing so she’d be able to lend to him again. He began to listen and nod along to the girl’s account of a most disturbing event she’d experienced in a dark station building in eastern Prussia where Hitler’s private train had rattled past a platform emptied of potential witnesses and flooded in light. Although no one was allowed to go anywhere near the windows, she looked out and caught sight of the pale Führer poring over a huge map table, almost at the point of collapse, in superhuman isolation, the loneliest creature on earth.

How the young Martinszky’s face must have burned when he responded to this sudden subject of his desire with a confession
of his own emotional homelessness ended forever in that moment by this homeless young girl! He was convinced that he had been delivered from a hell of godless desire into heaven itself! And what became of that trusting face? That was the only one I knew and loved, the one he gave to Oscar who was plotting to kill and described in his poem inspired by Nights of Cabiria. Half destroyed in the sinister and unforgiving light of the water’s depths. The sea in the poem, and the silvery surface of Lake Albano in the film.

Translated by Ralph Berkin

György Spiró

SPRING COLLECTION
(excerpt from a novel)

It’s not a bad idea for a man to get admitted to hospital a couple of days before a revolution breaks out, stay in until it’s been quashed and recuperate quietly at home during the ensuing purge. This way, fate saves him from making bad decisions at critical moments. In fact, it prevents him making any kind of decisions at all and also stops bad decisions being made about him during the revolution or after it is quashed by those who make decisions about the lives of others.

The hero of our tale, an engineer by the name of Gyula Fátray, celebrated his forty-sixth year on this earth on September 2. After starving himself for a whole day, he went into hospital on Wednesday, October 17. Once inside, he was given no food only drink. He received a thorough enema that morning, one at lunchtime and a third in the evening. Then, on October 18, he was operated on by his wife’s second cousin, Dr. Zoltán Kállai.

The pain of the first solid bowel movement after a surgery for haemorrhoids is likened to giving birth and they recommend it be done in hospital, lest complications occur. Our hero managed his on the fourth day after the operation, which fell on a Monday. He was duly congratulated by Kállai who told him he could go home the next day.

He still wasn’t able to go home on Wednesday because on Tuesday the whole thing kicked off. Everyone was evacuated to the basement and those injured in the street were taken straight down. Rókus Hospital didn’t have
the best situation when it came to street battles. It was built earlier than the surrounding six-story tenements and stuck out into Rákóczi Avenue. Its demolition was planned on several occasions but it always ended up remaining where it was. It never occurred to anyone at the end of the 18th century that Pest might one day become a battle ground although planners were people much like those who came before them and those who followed. The retaking of Buda was hardly a bloodless scuffle and they really might have recalled that a hundred years later. A revolution erupted and civil war broke out only fifty years after the hospital was opened. The whole of Pest could be shot at from the Gellértthegy, and that included Rókus Hospital that stood on what was then the perimeter of the city. The building took several hits during the Second World War and that’s when they erected the emergency operating theatre in the basement. There wasn’t enough money for a complete renovation and so that’s why they only restored the bombed chapel. Bullet holes left in the long wall from shots fired from the National Theatre could still be clearly seen eleven years after the war had ended.

This time, the section of the hospital that stuck out in the street came under pounding fire from Keleti Railway Station, the rusty torso of Elizabeth Bridge that had been bombed in the war, and gun posts set up at the tram terminal. The wounded swore blind that Hungarians were firing at Hungarians although most of the patients and doctors didn’t want to believe what they were being told. Hungarians at Hungarians? Not the Russians at Hungarians? They’re cutting up the Stalin statue only thirty yards from here in front of the National Theatre! Never! How did it get there from Dózsa György Avenue? Did it fly there?! Yeah, they flew it there! They brought in bits of bronze of various shape and size saying they came from the idol’s hands, ears, nose.

Unbelievable!

They’re shooting at the National Theatre from the Boulevard but that doesn’t stick out anywhere. They’re shooting at the party’s daily newspaper offices and they’ve looted the presses on the
first floor. The paternoster has broken down because someone smashed the plywood wall up between the up bit and the down bit on the ground floor.

Guns banged and stuff crashed and splintered over the patients’ heads. Despite a strict ban imposed by hospital management, some of the braver nurses and patients crept back up to the ground and first floors to listen to Kossuth Radio through the earphones that hung from the wall by the head of the beds. All of a sudden Kossuth Radio started to call itself Free Kossuth Radio. Reports kept coming in of contradictory short orders issued by the government and the Party while classical music was broadcasted all the time. The signal went every now and again, the power went off and they lit the basement with candles and spirit lamps and operated like that.

It was Tuesday evening and Gyula Fátray was sitting up in bed eating his supper. He could sit up now and that was quite an achievement after what he’d been through. He heard shots coming from the direction of Bródy Sándor Street and via the black galvanised earphones. He didn’t want to believe either of his ears and when he did believe them, he felt insulted. He couldn’t remember agreeing to live through yet another war. Those around him either felt petrified or jubilant. He just felt panic. Those who could walk carried the bedridden down to the basement along with bed, bedside cabinet and stool. A little physical exertion didn’t come amiss and at least while he was lifting, he didn’t have to think.

Doctor Kállai flew up and down the ward and each time he passed him, he’d shout, “Gyuszi, don’t do that, you’ll split your stitches!” and flapped on in his long, white coat.

By Wednesday evening, our hero had managed to run a temperature. Kállai diagnosed a chest infection on Thursday, October 25 by simply placing his ear on our hero’s back and then his chest. “Gyuszi, there’s absolutely no way we can let you go home like this! You’re going to have to lie this one out.” “I’ll lie it out at home.”

“They’re shooting all down Rákóczi Avenue and the Boulevard!” Doctor Kállai barked. “I can’t go home either! You only have to stick your nose out into the street to get shot full of holes!”

Kállai lived within literal spitting distance, over the road from the Uránia Cinema, and he hadn’t been able to make it back to his apartment since Tuesday evening. He kept in contact with his wife via the telephone. Unbelievable to imagine telephones working in a city at war but they worked perfectly in Pest.

“Anikó’s throwing a tantrum,” Kállai said with a sour tone. “She has to go all the way down to the street herself to get bread.”

Considered to be something of a beauty, but also rather selfish and awkward, everyone hated Anikó. She could be understood: she had married a wealthy surgeon who was guaranteed to get much wealthier due to his chosen profession and she could hang as much jewellery on her person as she could bear to carry. What couldn’t be understood was why Zoltán has taken her for his bride who, just before the big day, informed her that he had no intention of stopping his philandering just because they were to be married. Anikó responded by forcing a supercilious smile on her perfectly-formed face, and then felt terribly hurt when Zoltán kept his promise. She didn’t love Zoltán and now she hated him but she wasn’t willing to divorce because wealth was worth its weight. Zoltán also made it clear that he didn’t want a child; it had been enough to have one wife and two daughters killed in Auschwitz. Anikó didn’t insist on having a baby.

Doctor Kállai spent eighteen hours of every day either operating or assisting in theatre and the rest of his time went on debating and voting with the others on who should be a member of the revolutionary committee and who not. In the end, half of the committee was made up by doctors and the other half by hospital staff. Kállai had always made it plain, in close family circles, that he despised the system and now he was able to publicly state that the communists should be pushed from power. He’d joined the Communist Party back in ’45 but had found Party congresses less to his liking as the years passed. He particularly objected to the
Party’s political dislike of the intelligencia but he still remained a member.
"Zoltán’s a reactionary," our hero’s wife, Kati, would state every time they met Zoltán but then, to soften the sharpness out of such an allegation, she would always add, “but then he was a reactionary even as a child.”
Zoltán described the revolution as an historical turning point but his enthusiasm waned somewhat after the first two sittings of the revolutionary committee. A doctor’s vote carries just as much weight as that of a cleaning lady? Isn’t that simply another example of a proletariat dictatorship? Were doctors going to find themselves in a minority in their own hospital?!
The first item for debate was whether they should refer to themselves as a “revolutionary committee” or a “revolutionary council”. This took a good hour and a half to settle when they really should have been carrying out emergency surgery but everyone insisted on saying their part. Those who stood by “council” lambasted those proposing “committee” as turncoats and actively betraying Hungarian tradition and denying the values of 1848 but that lot had been voted in just the same way as the other lot. This was followed by a great many wasted words on whether they should treat all the injured or only Hungarian wounded and then only proven revolutionaries and how such proof could be provided, whether or not two witnesses were sufficient or should something be provided in writing and if so what should be written and by whom. The loudest protests against treating the Soviet wounded came in most part from those who had not only taken the Hippocratic Oath but who’d been the biggest Stalinists just a week before!
"I should defect to Palestine," Zoltán said. “Milk cows in a kibbutz! There was nothing real under communism but at least they have real communes there! Don’t bother about a thing in the world, just till the land! That has to be better because this is hopeless! At least they value doctors there!”
By Palestine he meant Israel, because that was what he’d always known it by and now he was convinced that he should have left in ’45.
“It’s too late now, Anikó doesn’t want to go. She likes it here and she’s always going on about how she doesn’t even look Jewish.”
“Then go on your own.”
“I couldn’t leave her here. She’s got no qualifications. She’d starve to death!”
“She’d get work somewhere. She could learn a trade or work in a shop.”
“I couldn’t do that to her.”
“Why not?”
“Because I married her.”
“Then get a divorce!”
“That’s out of the question.”
“Get her into an office somewhere with one of your grateful patients and then you go if you want to. You can leave her the flat and the paintings…”
“I’d leave them for her, of course I would, but that’d only be enough to last her five or six years…”
“She’d pick something up by then.”
“I couldn’t be that mean.”
“But you cheat on her all the time!”
“That’s different. I warned her about that beforehand.”
Our hero got to know very little of the news and horror stories. He was much better off having his body on fire, at least that way he didn’t have to think.
Then his temperature went down.
He couldn’t telephone home because the line was for use by the official hospital management only. There was one public booth and patients crept up to the ground floor despite the ban so the hospital management responded ingeniously by having a padlock fitted to the booth door.
He waited for his wife to come in. She had a nose that hung down to her top lip but she always used to ride in the section of the tram reserved for Christians and she never lost her nerve when she was
stopped by the Arrow Cross: she’d stare them straight in the eye and pinch her false papers between long, red, painted fingernails and proffer them with sufficient repulsion and it worked. But Kati didn’t come this time. Conflicts could be going on elsewhere.

It must have been complete chaos out there with the government makeup changing by the day, new political parties being created all the time and a mass of committees being formed. Impossible events were in turn denied or verified by patients, doctors, nurses and new patients. He tried his best to place his faith in no one and not to do any thinking at all.

They’ve stormed Party headquarters on Republic Square, they’ve lynched a couple of people and are digging, digging, digging looking for secret dungeons where they tortured prisoners. And they’re digging outside the Interior Ministry building next to the White House on Jászai Mari square, there were dungeons there too, look, it says so in the newspaper, from where they threw the dead bodies straight into the Danube. The ambulance men brought the newspapers in. They said they pushed their Red Cross flags out of the windows of the ambulance and so neither the revolutionaries nor the troops shot at them.

Zoli Kállai claimed that he managed to get hold of Kati a couple of times on the telephone and that they were fine and sent kisses. He was either telling the truth or not.

Then Kati turned up. She walked on tiptoe like ex-dancers generally tend to. Her wiry ginger hair was bound in a dark grey headscarf and she was wearing the exact sort of putty-coloured Macintosh that the revolutionaries ran around in. It was an old thing that she’d managed to preserve from the thirties and she wore to go on long walks. She wore a broad tricolour armband and she’d brought soup in a billycan. It was a wonder she hadn’t spilt the lot because the can didn’t close properly.

“There’s enough food here, what did you have to bring that for?!” our hero said by way of a thank you.

Kati shrugged. She boasted that she’d had to walk all the way to Oktogon where she’d been given a lift on the back of a military wagon by revolutionaries. She recounted her daring deed and then fell silent because she didn’t have anything else to brag about.

“Haven’t they been looking for me from the factory?"
“No.”

He regretted asking. If they had called, his wife would only save his feelings by denying it.

“What were you doing carrying things with fresh stitches?!” Kati snapped. “Zoltán told me on the telephone. It’s so irresponsible, so careless, so immature! Of course it made you ill! You very nearly died! You never give your family a thought!”

Our hero said nothing.

Kati said her piece and then tidied the top of the bedside cabinet and placed the billycan down.

“Have you got a spoon?” she asked in a stern tone.

“Yes.”

Kati took a seat by the side of the bed and said nothing.

“The child?”

“He’s all right. He plays a lot on his own. Marbles.”

“You’re not letting him go down to the street are you?”

“Of course not!”

“Is everything in order in the building?”

“All’s in order.”

Mr. Kovács, the beer-bellied, neckless, alcoholic caretaker, had stood drunk in front of the building on the morning of October 24 and begun to berate the Jews and the Ruskies. No one told him to stop although they were afraid the Russians might hear. There was no point in upsetting a sick man with such news.

He stroked his wife’s hand and she let him but she didn’t stroke his back instead preferring to inspect the setup in the basement.

“It’s cold down here,” she said.

“They didn’t plan any heating.”

“The nurse said you’ve got a lung infection.”

“My temperature’s gone down.”

“When are they going to move you back upstairs?”
“I don’t know. Soon.”
Kati carried on sitting by the side of the bed and neither of them spoke for a moment.
“Imagine,” she said darkly, “they shot Mrs. Huszár. She was standing in line outside Glázner’s and they shot into the crowd and hit her! Right in the chest! Mazel Tov!”
“Poor thing.”
Kati jumped up.
“I’m going to ask Zoli a thing or two!”
“What do you have to ask him about?”
“About what’s wrong with you.”
“Nothing, I’m just weak that’s all.”
Kati shook her head: she knew that he wouldn’t even tell the truth if he knew what was wrong with him. She was going to ask the doctor.
She went off in search of her cousin. Half an hour passed before she popped back for a second.
“He’s in theatre, I won’t wait. I’ve got to dash.”
“You take good care of yourself!”
He slumped back against his pillow, exhausted by her visit.
Kati came again on Saturday and brought pasta with poppy seeds.
“They’re letting me home on Monday!” our hero informed his spouse.
Kati nodded vacantly. She was in a very flat mood and her eyes stared darkly out of their sockets. The Mindszenty speech must be worrying her, our hero thought. Better not to bring that topic up in the basement in front of strangers. Better to deal with it at home if we must.
So for a while neither of them said anything about the fact that Mindszenty had called for the return of feudalism and capitalism.
Then Kati said, “I’ll take home what I can. I don’t want you carrying anything.”
“The ambulance will take everything tomorrow,” our hero suggested.
Kati went home empty-handed. The man in the next bed got to finish the pasta.
The Russians came in the next morning. The rattle of mortars and machineguns returned along with a new wave of wounded. This time our hero refrained from carrying casualties, his earlier guilty conscience wasn’t to be repeated. He hadn’t asked for the Soviet battalions to trample roughshod over the country because this, he felt, was not the liberation of eleven years ago. He just lay in his bed and if he could, he would have turned to face the wall but he couldn’t because his bed was in the middle row between two narrow corridors and the porters were forever knocking it when they brought new wounded in.
They didn’t take him home on Monday, the ambulance men were busy elsewhere.
“They’ll take you home tomorrow,” Zoltán said on Wednesday, November 7, which in this extraordinary year was not considered a holiday. “Kati will come here in the morning.”
“What the hell for?!”
“I told her on the telephone not to go to all the trouble but she wants to come in.”
“She’s going to get up at the crack of dawn to walk all the way here?! And if she gets shot?!”
It was Thursday, November 8 and Kati managed to arrive at the hospital just as our hero was being helped into the ambulance. They were taking another two patients so there was no room for Kati. Our hero started to make excuses but Kati just shrugged and said not to bother, she could walk home but she was obviously terribly hurt.
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“It’ll be no good you ringing the bell with the boy at home,” Kati said. “I told him not to answer the door to a soul… Here’s my key… Yours is at home in the top drawer of the dresser… I told him to get it out only if there’s a fire…”
She passed him the key.
“I’m going to go and have a word with Zoli!”
She hurried into the building and our hero watched her go. Zoli
was in theatre and he wouldn't be out before the evening. Kati knew that just as well as he did. Why did she have to playact all the time?
Home was too close. It had been so good to get away even if it was on sick leave. The key would cause hysterics, everything would cause hysterics.
He'd been pardoned marriage in hospital. All right, he'd be a while recovering at home and he was still weak and so there'd be allowances made.
He couldn't see out of the frosted windows of the ambulance and nothing of the city could be seen through the front because the driver had two others sitting next to him. He felt like he'd been locked in a cave that had no way out. He'd been stuck in a cave in the hospital basement and now he'd been thrown into another one and he'd most likely end up vegetating in a cave at home. He knew no more of what was going on around him than prehistoric man knew of the world.
The ambulance men sat in silence.
“What’s wrong, comrades? Holding the tongue?” asked one of his fellow patients, a chubby man with the look of a labourer and his leg in plaster.
The ambulance men didn’t answer.
It was then that our hero had the startling realisation: he'd been fantastically fortunate to have spent the whole time in hospital.
And it had been the whole time because it was over now. If the Soviets once decided to invade, neither man nor the Almighty would be able to shift them. They’d rolled into Budapest again and there was no question of them rolling out again. They’d pulled out of Austria the year before and many had hoped that they’d pull out of Hungary too. That illusion was no more. They had to quash the revolution and there was no way they were leaving now.
Anyone who'd taken part in the revolution would be subject to merciless reprisals.
As there was no way he could have joined the revolution, he'd miss out on the reprisals as well. It's not a bad idea for a man to get admitted to hospital a couple of days before a revolution breaks out, stay in until it's been quashed and recuperate quietly at home during the ensuing purge.
It wasn’t that he deserved to be spared anymore than anyone else, he was just lucky.
A freckly young boy with white skin and virtually invisible eyebrows stood and stared in horror when his father opened the hall door. He was so taken aback, he didn’t say a word. His ginger hair was cut close to his scalp what meant the barber on Pozsonyi Road was already open. Our hero flopped down on the freshly-made bed and pulled the eiderdown up over himself.
Kati came home two hours later, burst into floods of tears, knelt down by the side of the bed and didn’t want to let him go. Our hero controlled his temper enough to simply stroke her head with its bristly ginger hair and then he went back to sleep.

Translated by Ralph Berkin
We shall be in flight for thirteen hours. I unpack the red blanket and earphones that have been set out on the seat. Meanwhile the Japanese gentleman next to me is also settling in; with practised fluency, he kicks off his shoes and sets the linen eye-shield in place. He wriggles around a bit more but is then off in the land of Nod. I start reading David Scott’s guidebook: “Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most modest of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service.” Perhaps not. I close the book and take a look at what films are on offer, flicking back and forth through the menu. The sleeping foreign body right beside me makes me a trifle uneasy: it’s as though I were lying in a marriage bed and my temporary husband were signalling with his tiny snores that he is not best pleased that I am watching the night-time TV channel. Outside it is growing ever darker; we are leaving behind the layer of fluffy cloud that from here, inside, looks like an endless, solid snow-cover.

I keep switching and finally plump for _The Island_. Scarlett Johansson, in white overall, races around a futuristic interior space, then we see a swimming pool, with perfect young bodies lounging by its sides. Why not _Lost in Translation_ for preference, it crosses my mind; that would have been much more apt for this flight. I recall Bill Murray and the clips that he has forgotten to take off the
back of his jacket, which makes me laugh out loud, whereupon my neighbour stirs, grimaces, then composes his face. I envy him. I try to get to sleep, my head turned towards the window, my temple resting on the edge of the seat. I stroll on the fluffy, grey snow-cover; I am moving away from the aircraft, rather as if I were emulating a moon landing. There are lights flashing far off: perhaps the illuminated windows of a space city towards which the winking little blue lights of the dream walk are drawn. I repeatedly kick off from the candyfloss terrain and fly, letting my weightless body to be carried on outstretched wings by the air currents. The pilot’s voice rouses me: we have reached our final flying altitude, the outside temperature is —74˚C. My feet are freezing, whatever I do to rearrange the blanket around them. I plug the earphone back and again begin to watch the film. We step into an enormous room in which bodies are lying in rows that stretch further than the eye can see. They seem to be sleeping at attention, with open eyes, their impassive faces staring at a screen floating directly above them. Clones, untouched bodies without any history, serially manufactured humanoid vessels who are storing away the multitude of images that tumble in through their pupils: their future memories. The sleeping pill I took useless, I am unable to find my way back to the dream I was in before. I lie supine on the tipped-back seat and play at being a clone myself, a body without future or past, that a moving vehicle is hurling towards the unknown through a black emptiness. I don’t think, I have no feelings or pains, I forget about the rolled-up pullover under the nape of my neck and the man snuffling beside me, and gradually, by taking deep breaths, I manage to find my way back to that padded inner path. It is hard coming to: the blanket has slipped, my feet have gone totally numb. I need to collect my belongings. There’s a long queue in the corridor at Narita airport. I search for my passport, now there are just two in front of me. I put it in the travel guide, next to the foreign currency and the tickets. I now have to unpack everything onto the ground; a hairbrush drops out and I can see now that I have taken with me the earphones from the plane. Never mind. A woman with a low brow is sitting behind the glass. She glances at the passport, then into my face, right between the eyes: a minute area in my brain glows warmer as a signal of how far her gaze penetrates. A fraction of a second, an immeasurably tiny scrap of time is enough for the seismograph that functions in my guts, at the lowest level of my consciousness, to switch on, for a slow, cramping sensation, originating in the gastric region, to signal that something is going to happen. Precisely what, I don’t know, and it doesn’t even matter: the same thing that has happened a hundred thousand, a million times over, I know the final words as if one were hesitantly rehearsing the same few lines of a role that has been done to death it is so familiar, each time taking another run at saying it in varying circumstances, in the well or badly fitting costumes of one’s periodically changing fate, “Step out of the line.” “Come with me.” “Put that down.” “Go over there.” I am now sitting, since who knows how long, in a completely transparent room with walls of wire glass. An armed female droid is standing before the door. She won’t answer my question, won’t open the door and doesn’t even turn round in response to my occasional knocking. I need to pee, I’m hungry, my head is aching, I don’t know the hotel’s address and I want to get the woman on sentry duty at the door to ring the embassy, to have returned my handbag to me, to inform the Japanese man who has been delegated to welcome me and may still be waiting, and I would like to secure an apology from them and get the whole implausible, dream-like misunderstanding cleared up. I don’t know how much time can have passed: my mobile phone is in my hand luggage. “Please. Please! Please!!” My rattling is to no avail, the armed silhouette does not budge. Someone outside walks past, and I try to rattle to him too, but he doesn’t so much as glance at me. It suddenly occurs to me that I
ought simply to squat in the middle and have a pee. Or maybe ease my bowels. Or both—yes, that’s it, take a shit and have a pee. But I lack the courage: I get up then awkwardly stretch myself out at full length on the curved plexiglass bench as a way of demonstrating that this tired, imprisoned body, straining as it is from having to retain its urine, has no wish to sit and wait in a disciplined fashion. The bench is uncomfortable, my side is aching. The female droid, who seemingly has eyes in the back of her head, immediately wheels round and enters:

“Wake up, please. Sit on the bench.”

I lose nerve at the mechanical sound of the voice and sit up with a feeling of nausea. I meanwhile spot two other people being escorted towards the glass room.

As soon as the door has closed behind them, they introduce themselves. They also don’t know why they have been brought here, but they don’t seem particularly bothered or surprised by it either. They tell me it’s one-thirty, which means I have been sitting here for more than two hours. The Portuguese woman starts nibbling on something from out of a bag in her pocket, and between bites lobs short, pithy English sentences over at us. I nod coolly back as I sense that it would exhaust the last scraps of my dignity to allow myself to utter a word, for then I shall only be indignant and gripe away, possibly even cry; yes, that was what I feared most of all—that I would burst into tears before these two strangers.

As soon as the doorman has closed the glass doors behind them, they introduce themselves. They also don’t know why they have been brought here, but they don’t seem particularly bothered or surprised by it either. They tell me it’s one-thirty, which means I have been sitting here for more than two hours. The Portuguese woman starts nibbling on something from out of a bag in her pocket, and between bites lobs short, pithy English sentences over at us. I nod coolly back as I sense that it would exhaust the last scraps of my dignity to allow myself to utter a word, for then I shall only be indignant and gripe away, possibly even cry; yes, that was what I feared most of all—that I would burst into tears before these two strangers. They had not taken the bag from man from the Cameroons: he produced a book and started to read. All of a sudden, he stands out among us, invested by a transparent carapace of freedom, like a glass cube within a glass cube. Every now and then, he looks up, glances at his watch then reimmerses himself in his book.

Having finished her bread roll, the Portuguese woman is now reapplying her lipstick. I start blurting out daft sentences, stuff about how my work is to do with literature, and I’ve come for a conference. I can hear myself speaking, and I’m ashamed, but I go on all the same: “I am a tourist, I write poems. I am invited…to a… congress…to a literary congress.” The Portuguese woman gives a sympathetic smile. My bladder is aching. I don’t understand where they get their composure from, whence this enviable, near-naive indifference that takes no cognisance of blood, chance, nocturnal cold or dank pits, because the Cameroonian gentleman and the Portuguese woman could just as easily be frightened the way that I am frightened, me, who has come from Central Europe and among whose ancestors, pacing around in a long row of dumbfounded figures, stands Franz Kafka and also the Flaming-haired Man, just as my deceased great-great-grandfathers and great-great-grandmothers are lined up, and my father and mother and even our dog, confused and with that worn-out lead round his neck. So I just know that they can hit on something; I carry it as part of my genetic make-up that anything can happen at any time, and the fact of its happening or not happening bears no causal relation to our own deeds, our character, our secret or professed desires or our intentions. There is just one thing I can do, then, and that is to hope that they will find what they are looking for as speedily as possible.

After three and a quarter hours have passed, in comes the droid and asks me to accompany her. She escorts me to a table upon which stands my zipped-up hand baggage. They don’t open it, they ask nothing and they explain nothing, just hand over my passport.

“Enjoy your time in Japan!”

I don’t give the droids an answer but hunt around with my eyes for a toilet. Two of them, with suspicious alacrity, poke a finger in the direction of the far corner of the immense hall. I have a feeling that it may be too late, that I’ve already peed myself and maybe just don’t realise the back of my skirt is showing a dark urine patch.

I now have to search for my suitcase, via my baggage slip, from the luggage office. “Yes, yes. We have it.” I set off for the exit. My gait is alarmingly easy; maybe I’m not even here. Maybe it’s a dream, after all. Almost certainly, in fact: the hunger’s gone, the pain’s gone, time too has gone—there is no clock in sight on the
gleaming marble walls. I drift around, lost in translation. I am asked to step aside by a customs officer at the checkpoint. He hauls my suitcase aside then signals to the armed guard waiting further off. They indicate that I should follow them.

If you can hear me, Eugène Ionesco, if there is anything up there, though it didn’t look like it from the plane, then say a prayer for me! Intercede for an abbreviation of the text; let’s cut the cackle or this is going to be very long-winded.

We now trudge the entire length of the sodding airport, and it gradually dawns on me that we are heading straight for the point where they let me through barely ten minutes ago.

Indeed: the two previous uniformed figures are still standing there at the table. They nod, lift up my suitcase and lean over it as if they were physicians having an exploratory look at a bloated stomach. I am suddenly struck by what seems a brilliant idea. I turn politely, with a wan, phoney smile, towards one of the dark-uniformed figures—the one who had handed back my passport:

"Excuse me, sir, does anyone here speak French?"

The other glances from behind the opened lid, and for a flash of a second the colourfully writhing innards are on view; he looks at me and politely replies in perfect French:

"Non, Madame, je suis désolé. Ici personne ne parle français."

He achieves what he was after. All of a sudden, before I know it, I dissolve in tears. I don’t have a handkerchief. I notice that my nose is running, and I can’t wipe it. I watch them as they pull the stiffeners out, one by one, from my bras. Crush the effervescent vitamin C tablets on the table. Slit open the artificial silk lining all round inside of the suitcase. As they paw, sniff, pry, frisk, pluck, tug, scratch, scrabble, and generally turn things inside-out. Over.

It will soon be over; this is now the end of the scene. My mascara is rattling, my nose is running. That was it. But no, hang on: I still have a brief two-line role. One of them discovers in an outside pocket a bag containing red plastic hair rollers. He takes them out and looks cluelessly at me. I can’t imagine why the hell I brought them, what I was thinking at home when I was packing, but it does me good to get my own back for the crying, the tears I shed in front of them. I daintily pick up a roller and demonstrate to him, almost gleefully, that he can slide it onto his willie, like this, very carefully—that’s what it’s for. It seems the droids haven’t been constructed with an in-built joke sensor unit; the uniformed man’s expression remains impassive, but he takes out all the little cylinders from the bag and peeks into each of them, one by one. But then they bring this too to an end, and the previous farewell is repeated:

"Enjoy your time in Japan!"

Here I am again, heading for the customs gate, hauling after me the suitcase now it has been eviscerated, tortured and stitched together again, its maw full of tamped-down clothes and books with spines sore from being pried apart.

I step out into the sunshine; it has gone noon and the traffic in the street is roaring so loudly it’s as if I had stepped out from the silence of a crypt into the swifter, pulsating world of the living. Standing opposite the exit is the man delegated to welcome me, implausibly holding up a sign the size of a transparency on which my name is blazoned. They are waiting ergo I am. He bows deeply and beams at me. He has been standing there, on the pavement, for four and a half hours, and by now he is probably not going to be able to straighten his right arm again today and put it down by his side. He asks if there was a problem.

I shake my head: no, nothing serious, but it moves so smoothly on my neck that I opt to quit the waggling and just grin like an imbecile. One of my vertebrae is missing, I now notice.

"I’d like to change some money," I say quietly.

"Of course."

We stroll over to a distant tiny window set in the wall, where one has to ring a bell. A woman with a low brow appears and asks for my ID. I slot the passport through the tiny window then start to rummage in my handbag. David Scott’s guidebook is in there (‘Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most mod-
est of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service”). The return ticket is there in the guidebook, and of course there is that opened packet of paper handkerchiefs—how come I couldn’t find that beforehand. Well, never mind. I take out the envelope labelled currency, in which there are three hundred euros—money put aside from past journeys.

From three years ago, when we were still in love and we went to Italy. At the sight of the envelope, I am reminded of the whole trip to Italy, reminded of the person I loved, with whom we invented the most amorous game of my life, reminded of the dozen slips of paper spread out on the hotel table that we turned over one by one—one wish for each night.

It’s been three years since all that occurred, and how quickly it has passed; most of the slips stayed face down. Confused images bubble up within me of the arguments, the shouting by the dark and misty bank of the Arno, and the last evening of bitter altercation that went on into daybreak.

I fill in the form: three hundred euros, yes, in denominations of one hundred.

I tear up the envelope.

For hearing me and interceding for me, Eugène Ionesco, I am truly grateful for those barely merited ministrations. There are no sentences hovering aimlessly between languages, or desires hovering everlastingly in the air; meanings are not lost in translation in this big wide world, for in time’s slowly rotating kaleidoscope even forgotten and misunderstood sentences will glimmer once more before our incredulous eyes.

In the envelope are lurking slips of paper instead of money: homemade bank notes of our uncashed love that have been withdrawn from circulation. On the first, which in the end, for some reason, I don’t push in the tiny window in front of the low-browed woman, is written Lick my bellybutton!

...A new beginning... We’re driving into town; I’m looking at the tiny houses by the roadside, every now and then I nod off for a few minutes. From every airport there is a sleep-inducing multi-lane highway that links the no-man’s-land of outer suburbs like this with the throbbing centre and is bordered by poky, densely-packed, single-story buildings with clothes hanging out to dry, mysterious windows, the ornaments of alien lives. With a weary look, I photograph their strange roofs, the tiny bamboo-shuttered windows.

We quickly reach the hotel. The huge tower block is entirely surrounded by similar shafts; I am immediately lost. While my escort and the receptionist busy themselves with checking me in, I buy a sandwich at the buffet bar: I simply don’t have the strength to take a place in the restaurant.

I am given one of the rooms on the nineteenth floor; my sound-insulated and unopenable window looks out onto an identical building. I stare at the buttons set into the wall and dubiously press one of them. The electric shutter descends and the rooms is plunged into darkness. My name appears on the TV screen in greeting. I’m glad, too, since it means that at least it’s not pitch-black. I press another button: music strikes up. I come to my senses and insert the door card into its place; now I can at least switch the lights on. With brightness back again, I confidently press the previous button again, but instead of the shutters rising some soft atmospheric lighting built into the wall comes on. All right then, one more time, on the row below. The shutter slips up with a hum. Got it now, no sweat: I can make light and dark, though the order is down to chance. So, how about the temperature. There are two buttons; I touch one of them twice, then kick off my shoes and stretch out on the bed.

I wake up to find I’m absolutely freezing. It is bitingly cold in the room, while outside is an evening darkness shot through with lights. My hands are implausibly stiff; I must have set the air conditioning to roughly freezing point. I have a quick wash under the shower, which runs alternately hot-and-cold in accordance with some recondite logic, then go down to reception, though not
before doing a bit of racing between the four lifts because the one I am just about to step into is always going up.

Behind the desk, down on the ground floor, a man wearing spectacles bows courteously and wants to take the magnetic card off me at all costs, but I’m not willing to yield it to him. He smiles resolutely.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how the air conditioner works. I did… something wrong… and… it turned too cold in the room.” I rub my arms to make it even clearer what the problem is. The bespectacled man instantly asks someone to take his place and accompanies me up to my room. As soon as we enter he starts to grin unabashedly: evidently I’m not the first tourist to have deep-frozen herself. He pushes twice on the button in the wall, then bowing profusely backs out, whereas I, instead of seeing to my suitcase, start to order the newly rediscovered slips of paper.

As though I had come all this way to do that. I had dimly felt for weeks and months that I would be troubled by this feeling; that it would pop up in the most unexpected, most preposterous situations; that one cannot just ditch a relationship; that I was going to have work to do if the still present, haunting, unconcluded period that I had put behind me was to become past history.

Looking in broad outline at the twelve requests, I would have to conclude that while my lover’s sentences, with one exception, expressed very concrete wishes, my messages intimated more in the way of an unspecified, unfulfillable lack: as if I had imposed on him no lesser a task than filling in all the cracks that had opened up on the fabric of my existence. After the event, sitting on a double bed on the far side of the world, I suddenly understand why he had always talked about exchangeability, why he believed that his personality was actually being lost in the circle of insane love that was drawing in his being. It dawns on me that this intensity of passion actually depersonalizes; that the person from whom everything is wanted is, in the end, capable of giving nothing, because he is no longer capable of knowing whether it is really he who is reflected on the swirling surface of another soul’s.

Stay with me forever.
What garbage. It was me who wrote it, of course. I slump back, as if I couldn’t take any more, then sit up and divide the slips into two parts. *May it never be this good with anyone else* is placed at the very top—that is at least as lunatic as mine: more a curse than a wish, more desperation than desire. Two piles of six paper strips are placed front down on the bed. It can’t be an accident that these chits have accompanied me here. I turn them back over again, one by one. I need to find a place for these words that were once committed to writing—a final resting place.

The next morning, I stand before the gate to a nearby Shinto shrine. In my hand is a map of the city, in my pocket the slips. First of all I want to place the most ardent of my ex-lover’s notes—that’s what I have set as my task for this morning. I am at a loss as I look around. The request is outspoken and passionate, yet also charmingly clumsy when written down. I intend a special, ever so secret place for it. A warm, safe, permanent nook. I stroll into the shrine’s park. Its entrance is guarded by two lions; the right-hand one with its mouth agape, symbolising life, the other’s shut, the lion of death. I mooch around in the park, watching the locals. They come in, rinse their hands, enter the shrine, their every gesture reflecting some industrious haste: maybe they really have only popped in for a couple of minutes. I am just in the process of photoing the golden-hued leaves of a gingko-tree when a flock of white pigeons takes roost among the boughs. Pigeons! I ponder at length on how it might be possible to entrust the most ardent of my slips of paper to a white pigeon in such a way that a surprised monk might take delivery of a now invalid message written in a foreign tongue. That’s daft: a simpler way has to be found.

The solution suddenly hits me: I shall tuck it away in the mouth of the lion symbolising life, so that tomorrow it may breathe fire and startle those who pass by with its redly blazing eyes. I have already set off back when I suddenly stop short. Over the way, I see a multitude of white paper scraps fluttering on lengths of twine stretched between poles. It’s as if those were relatives of my
chits shivering there on the line—lily-white strips as yet unwritten upon. The purity of being without desire. I step across there and, without thinking, string up one of my sentences: Stroke my beasts. I sense that what I am doing is, in some sense, improper, yet at the same time I am clear about the cultic connotations of my action, so I don’t allow the doubts that are simmering in my consciousness to get a word in.

On the way out, I look back once and take my leave of the desire from three years ago. The minutely printed slip of paper is lost among its unmarked fellows; maybe I would no longer even be able to find it if I suddenly wished to take it down. I arrive back at the entrance: like this, close-up, the stone lion looks an exceedingly tough nut. Its splendid, big, open mouth is at a height of at least six foot six, so I’m going to have to clamber up somehow in order to be able to place my paper slip in it. I start awkwardly taking photos and meanwhile spy out whether there are any suitable protrusions on it. An unusual number of passers-by are crowding on the street; it’s lunchtime and growing numbers of office workers are emerging from the surrounding buildings.

I have been photographing the lion so long that it is starting to become conspicuous, or so I imagine. If someone asks, I’ll say that I just want to see if it has a tongue. After all, there are stupid tourists everywhere: I make a habit of being interested specifically in lions’ tongues—that in itself is surely not yet a crime. I picture to myself a Japanese tourist working his way up onto one of the Chain Bridge’s stone lions back in Budapest, but then I realize that this isn’t quite the same thing, it’s more like wanting to take a look inside the head of a statue of the Virgin Mary. I suddenly make my mind up, stow the camera in my pocket and start to climb. No one pays any heed, and I’m standing face to face with the dragon-like physiognomy before it occurs to me that, clinging on with my two hands like this, I’m not going to be able to get out the envelope, and even if I were, I would at best only be able to pull out the most ardent of the slips of paper with my lips, which—let me see—would not intrinsically run counter to the spirit of the wish that is to be placed there, but does seem impossible to accomplish in practice. But then I am a great idiot. I shin down, get the slip of paper ready and clamber back up. Down below, a little girl comes to a standstill and, holding her mother’s hand, gazes up at me. She is obviously now going to be told that one shouldn’t do that sort of thing, but I can’t turn back: I’ve almost attained my goal, stretch a little bit further and I’m touching the smooth in-curved tongue with my finger. It’s in, done! I jump down and smile reassuringly at the little girl, even though my knees are hurting. I shouldn’t have pushed off from that height. The mother drags her away while I suddenly feel very tired. I leave the lion with the sentence’s tangy, burning foreignness: I hope it savours it. A nice piece of work, that was, quick work, grieving work.

The next day, in the morning, I make a pilgrimage out to the Asakusa Kannon temple. By the main entrance are two statues standing in kiosks, barbed wire in front of them. I decide on the statue of Lightning and shove one of the strips at its feet: Kiss all along my spine. I subsequently regret that choice, as Lightning would have deserved another sentence, but then I summon up the sensation, summon up how it was when he slowly kissed all along my spine and latch on that the paper lying between the feet of Lightning and Thunder is in a good place, after all.

I need to buy a present for my child; I would do better to have a look around today. I travel aimlessly and wearily on the subway, then at Takebashi station I suddenly flick in front of a train one of the balled-up strips that I took out at the temple. I act quickly, like a suicide: May it never be this good with anyone else is already vanishing under the train as it pulls in. A diminutive old lady gives me a dirty look as we board: she takes me for a tourist litter-lout. A few stops further on and I then look in on the toy department of a gigantic store. I pass in front of a phalanx of battery-driven, remote-controlled robots: shooting, flashing, gesticulating. My shoes have blistered my feet; I need to buy some sticking-plasters. I don’t see any sensible present and wander ever-more list-
lessly among the horrific figures. There’s a line of money-boxes ranged on a shelf across the way.

Suddenly I have marvellous inspiration. I toy with the idea of a Japanese boy who is turning thirteen and on his birthday goes into his room to break open his money-box. Why thirteen, I don’t know, but for some reason I insist on this touch, and it doesn’t so much as cross my mind that the money-box might equally be a girl’s. But then, I never had a money-box myself; saving was somehow something that boys did—for a bike or roller-skates, that sort of thing. A thirteen-year-old boy will find my slip of paper, I am absurdly sure of that.

Stepping over to the money-boxes, I picture how, at a ceremonial hour of that remote day, a strange strip of paper, inscribed in a foreign language, will turn up among the money that is to be counted: Talk about your secret desires.

A piebald pottery cow is what I plump for. I furtively look around, as if I were perpetrating some illicit act, slip the chit in, then steal out of the toy department. It occurs to me later on that the security men may well be perplexed on viewing the CCTV recordings and will never know what the limping European female was up to.

I need to go back to the hotel to change shoes and think my action plan over: I have seven slips of paper left, but tomorrow will be the midpoint of my stay here, a dividing-line, a watershed. I turn the saddest of the sentences over in my mind: that will be tomorrow’s task, I shall have to bury that somewhere in order to be able finally to lay it to rest within myself as well.

At the hotel, I carefully split up what has to be done and plan the further localities, making allowance for impromptu opportunities as well. The sentence Caress me with your hair touches me. It is a little bit like my own wishes, a gentle, loving sigh from another evening. I decide to release it to the winds, assuming there will be any, for up till now the air warmed by equable, languid sunlight, has been still.

The next morning, I am already up from the breakfast table by eight-thirty. I wait for the Americans, ordering taxis with much hand-waving, to clear out of the way, and then inquire in a muted voice at reception:

“Sorry, does the wind blow here? I mean… is here any… wind?”

The same bespectacled man is on duty as on the first day. He is surprised by the question at first but then looks up and identifies with a smile: the woman with the temperature problems. He clearly believes I must have an immune deficiency or asthma or something of the kind: so many people have allergies nowadays. Carefully enunciating, he replies with a smile: “We have a nice day. So the weather is pleasant today. I can assure you that the wind is not blowing today.”

Well, that leaves the sad paper-slip for today. The saddest. And the bath one, but that’ll be a doddle. I’ll make my way first to the riverbank, then go by foot to the bridge leading the Imperial Palace. I would like to get closer to the water but there are barriers everywhere that keep it apart from the banks. It’s a somewhat banal option, but I want simply to toss the Let’s take a bath together note into water. The paper is too light. I ought to tie it to something, but I have neither twine nor an elastic hair band on me. I finally search for a stick in some bushes and step on one. That’s the thing! One end is split, so I can use that to nip my bit of paper, and then I lob it as vigorously as I can into the seemingly stationary river. It doesn’t float off in any direction, just rotates with immense slowness on the water’s surface before coming to a complete stop.

How hard it is to be freed of desires.

I turn my back on the barrier and stroll back past the bushes that fringe the main road. The crows in this part of the world are odd: the plumage on the tops of their heads is short, which makes them look all like they’ve been given a crew cut. They hop along curiously beside me. I am becoming more and more excited, my heart beating fast in anticipation of the task in store. Finally, I drag it out no further but squat down by a crater that has formed around one of the trees and start to grub in the soil. Though I make use of a twig, the ground is compact and I have trouble digging a shallow hole. Joggers in trainers and wearing headphones
are running past me; this seems to be a regular path for them. I suddenly have the feeling that someone is watching me: a man walking his dog is staring, even stooping his upper body over and gazing, head cocked to one side, at the grubbing. I have a feeling he wants to help; no doubt he thinks I have lost something. I look up with a sweet smile to signal that everything’s fine, would they just carry on as they are disturbing me in my mourning. When they finally set off and I glance at their backs, I notice the man is wearing exactly the same blue pully as his pooch. It suddenly flashes through my mind that the doggie quite likely wanted to see to it’s business, that this is perhaps its favourite spot and I have plonked myself down right here. I walk round the tree and am reassured not to see a dog turd anywhere, after which I make a pile of pebbles over the buried paper-slip.

I’ve done. I walk off. From a few yards away one can barely notice the little mound under which rests the saddest of my paper-slips: I want to bear you a child.

Late that evening I take a seat in a cramped restaurant in a shopping centre. The trays of the noisy youngsters who dined before me are being taken away while I listlessly cast my eyes over the beautifully formed bowls and little dishes. I am the sole late-night customer; I can see the staff in the corridor, leaving the kitchen one by one. All the same, the service shows no trace of hurrying me up; the dishes that I ordered at random are brought out cordially and in a steady rhythm. When I’ve finished I place one of the wishes on the tray as a quite special tip. This is my lover’s second most impassioned sentence, though it may well be that others would settle on a different order and would not rank tonight’s behind the lion one. It may be that Stay with me forever can only be put to rest in the volcano’s soil, but if I am unable to go right to mountain, then why set off at all. I thank her politely for the sheet of paper, bow and turn out of the lobby like someone who is setting off for Fuji right away: I wouldn’t like the lady to feel let down. On reaching the bustling street, however, I turn and head instead for a nearby playground.

A mother is teaching her little boy how to walk; the child is tottering happily, with unsteady gait, towards her, and the stocky woman keeps reiterating a short word over and over again. I watch them for a long time, scan the benches and the toy castle. To be truthful, I am searching for a spot for the Dance for me note, but nothing springs to mind. That afternoon, I discover a strange carved panda statue in the garden of a small Buddhist shrine. The wooden statue is hollow at the back, having been gouged out, a bit like a bathtub. Lick my belly-button, rolled up like a cigarette, finds its way into the panda’s mouth. Not the most dazzling solution, even I will admit, but then acceptable for all that. The wish was fairly startling by the way: what on earth could have got paper; indeed, judging from the chest size, would be hard put to accomplish the lubricious task. I am musing on this when the tray is unexpectedly taken away. All my worries were unnecessary: the young lad gives the slip of paper, nor indeed me, nary a second glance. I am left with enough money for two more days and four sentences.

It is not quite as easy to get to the volcano of Mount Fuji as I had supposed. In the morning, the lady down at reception explains how many times I have to transfer lines on the subway before I reach the railway station. In four hours, she says, you can get quite close to the mountain. But I don’t want to get close: I want to get there. Maybe that’s the trouble, this wanting it all: it would be enough to get close to things, but no, for me nothing but the volcano, the crater, will do.

I thereby always spoil everything. By the time she has finished marking all the stations on a photocopied sheet I have lost heart. It may be that Stay with me forever can only be put to rest in the volcano’s soil, but if I am unable to go right to mountain, then why set off at all. I thank her politely for the sheet of paper, bow and turn out of the lobby like someone who is setting off for Fuji right away: I wouldn’t like the lady to feel let down. On reaching the bustling street, however, I turn and head instead for a nearby playground.

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into me that evening in Italy, given that my belly has been ticklish all my life long. I have no idea how pandas feel about it, but I would never have found an ideal spot for this sentence. *Dance for me* finally ends up in a tree cavity—a message to the motionless bough, sender not known.

The next day I spend at the Tokyo National Museum and that evening am lounging exhausted on the bed, flicking through channel on the TV. I am tired; the place of the rapidly shifting scenes is continually being taken by scenes from my past life, while from time to time I am haunted by the statuettes seen earlier that day, until at last I gradually drift off to the sound of a newsreader gabbling in English. I placed the envelope, still containing two slips of paper, face down on the upholstered shelf over the head of the bed, next to the paper handkerchiefs and my guidebook: “Japan is an exorbitant country, but standards of provision everywhere are so high that even when staying at the most modest of hotels, eating in restaurants that the Japanese frequent on a daily basis, and travelling solely by public transport, one will receive nothing less than impeccable service.”

I fall asleep with my clothes still on; I only wriggle out of my jeans at daybreak.

I wake up in the morning to see, with astonishment, that the envelope is not in its place. I have just quarter of an hour left to get breakfast, so I elect to dress hurriedly and dash down to the dining room: I’ll track it down after ten o’clock. On getting back to my room, I change the battery in my camera and then I probe all around the bed. While I’m doing that, a cleaning lady knocks on the door, her arms full of clean towels. It is hard to deflect her from her aim, but after I have demonstrated that I would like to sleep she departs with head nodding.

The envelope is nowhere to be seen; it has simply disappeared. All at once, I notice that there is a gap between the wall and the little shelf: it has slipped in there, and head-down at that. I try to haul the bed away but the shelf and the upholstered ledge are in one piece, and I would have to rip it out of the wall. Most probably that is where the wires to the built-in lights run, those are what the velvet-covered panel is hiding. The envelope will now stay there, and inside it the two slips of paper, perhaps to be found by an electrician one day when he comes to renovate it or repair an short circuit. *Stay with me forever. Caress me with your hair.* Come to think of it, it’s not such a bad place, there, behind the bed. Two Japanese electricians will shrug their shoulders on seeing my envelope; indeed, they may even hand it in at reception, or maybe a cleaning woman will attempt to detach a piece of paper that has been sucked into the screaming vacuum cleaner’s head.

There is know way of knowing when all this will take place. Whether the crumpled envelope, with the foreign sentences that have no meaning for them, comes into their hands in the distant future, even years from now, or next week, I shall just have to wait. That is when the mourning will be at an end. I shall sense the moment when the very last sentence fades within me, like the anger that I felt at the airport. The pain will subside, the mortification, and only the white space of the wishes will throw light on it, like the shrine’s unwritten scraps of paper.

On my last day it is pouring with rain. The wind gets up as well, but to what purpose now, as I’ve already done what I have to do, accomplished my coincidental mission. While struggling with an umbrella that has been blown inside-out on my way to the subway station, I wonder whether anything might have been left for the rain.

What comes to mind is the depression around the tree and the message that must slowly be turning to pulp under the pile of stones. It’s better this way; the rain was well-timed, the wind too. That evening I get back to my room soaked through and absolutely whacked. I undress and, shivering with cold, slip under the bedcover but am unable to warm up. I press a button: I would like to turn the heating on for at least a short while before I go to sleep.

On the morning of departure I wake up to find myself gasping for air. It is stifling, unbearably hot, and outdoors there is implausibly
bright sunshine. I don’t know when I must have climbed down from the bed: I am lying on back, my kimono open, on the cold floor.
I am a clone: wounds, pains, a timeless empty body, a perfect copy of my historyless self. Someone from up above, from the twentieth floor, is projecting on the ceiling, into my wide-open eyes, scenes of my life to date, my future memories.

Translated by Tim Wilkinson

Miklós Vajda

PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER IN AN AMERICAN FRAME
(excerpt from a memoire-novel)

She stands in the kitchen, in a kitchen, not our kitchen, not the old kitchen, not any of our old kitchens, but her own kitchen, an unfamiliar one, not mine, and she cooks, stirs something. She is cooking for me. That’s another new thing, a strange thing. But there she stands, repeating anything I want, anywhere, whatever I happen to want most, at the time I want it. I am still here: she is not. And there are things I do want. But even if I didn’t want them she would carry on coming and going, doing this and that, entering my head, calling me, talking, listening, now in delight, now in pain, thinking of me or looking at me, ringing me, asking me things, writing to me as if she were alive. I am insatiable: I am interested in all that is not me, in what is private, in affairs before me and after me, in her existence as distinct from mine, and I try to fit the jigsaw together, but nowadays, whatever she is doing—and I can’t do anything about this—is always, invariably done for me, because of me, to me, with me or on my behalf—or rather, of course, for me.
At this very moment I want her to stand there, in that kitchen, stirring away. Let’s have her cooking one of those dishes she learned abroad, let her make a caper sauce to go with that sizzling grilled steak. But I often have her repeat a great many other things too: for example, I have recently taken to observing her secretly from my bed as she slowly removes her make-up at the antique dressing table with the great gilded antique Venetian mirror hanging over it, looking into the antique silver-framed standing mirror before her, going about her task in a business-like manner,
applying cream with balls of cotton wool, her hands working in a circular motion, efficiently, always in exactly the same way, pulling faces if need be, puffing out a cheek, rubbing her skin then smearing it with, among other things, a liquid she refers to as her ‘shaking lotion’ and which dries immediately so she looks like a white-faced clown. Then she wipes it off and I fall asleep again. The room is full of mirrors, each of the six doors of the built-in cupboard is a full-length mirror.

My bed is there in her bedroom: my own bedroom is being used by the German Fräulein. Sometimes I wake late at night just as she enters from the bathroom, wearing her yellow silk dressing gown and I hear her as she applies creams and lotions for the night before going to bed, as she moves around, gets comfortable, clears her throat and gives a good sigh before falling sound asleep, her mouth open, contented, exhaling loudly, exactly the way I catch myself doing nowadays.

Or I am watching her at eleven in the morning, as she steps into the car, fully madeup, elegantly dressed, wearing hat and gloves and high-heeled shoes, as she throws back the fashionable half-veil, pulls out of the garage, turns in the drive, takes the left-hand lane—the traffic is still driving on the left—and sets off from our Sas Hill villa in the Buda hills into the city centre to do her shopping before meeting her friends in the recently opened Mignon Espresso—the first of its kind in Hungary—or at the Gerbeaud patisserie where she might go on to meet my father who sometimes strolls over from his office to talk over their plans for the next day or whatever else is on their minds. Then they come home together to eat. Or I see her in Márianosztra, or possibly, later, in Kalocsa, at the end of the monthly visiting time, led away by a guard armed with a submachine-gun, out of the hall that is divided in half by a partition of wire netting, leaving through double steel doors, overlooked by enormous portraits of Stalin and Rákosi, and I catch a glimpse of her as she is shepherded away in a procession of prisoners and guards, and she freezes for a moment, conscious perhaps of me looking at her, to look back
over her shoulder, sensing me standing there, staring at her. The
guard’s flat cap is covering half her face but her slight squint, her
nod, her faint smile and her suspiciously shining eyes tell me more
than she could say to me in the fifteen allotted minutes
in the presence of the guard.

Never in my life have I seen her cry. She did not cry when my
father died, nor when her sister died. She cannot, she could
not, perhaps she never wanted or allowed herself to give direct
expression to intense feeling, not in words and certainly not in
wild gestures. When either of us was going away on a longer trip
she would embrace me and give me a light, brief kiss while gen-
tly patting my back by way of encouragement, then drawing a lit-
tle cross on my forehead with her thumb. That’s how we parted
in December 1956 at the Southern Terminal, both of us in ruins,
like the town itself, silently, crying without tears, since we both
knew we would not see each other again for years, maybe never.
Nor did I ever hear her sing or hum. Or, and this is another scene I
often conjure, the telephone is ringing there, at her home in New
York, and she looks at me in confusion, pleading with me once
again silently rather than in words, to answer it again because she
has difficulty, particularly on the telephone, in understanding the
language. Most of the time, of course, the caller is Hungarian. She
hardly knows anyone here who is not Hungarian. Nowadays I have
her pull this pleading face time and again, as if repeating a scene
on DVD; I torture myself with it, it is my punishment. I always
regret it but once or twice I rebuke her rather sharply for not hav-
ing in all that time learned the language properly. But no sooner
have I said the words than I am already regretting them: I don’t
know what has made me say them, made me want to lecture and
criticise her, what makes me want to assert my independence, to
push her away from me time after time. It’s some obscure, as yet
inexplicable urge I have to prod her where she is most vulnerable
and often I am unable to resist it. I see she resents it; that I have
hurt her; that it saddens her, that it makes her suffer, and that she
closes up, but, wisely, accepts the latest rebuke, generously add-
ing it to the rest. Perhaps she understands this instinctively bet-
ter than I do. Even in the years before prison I was subjecting her
to these low tricks; she bore the pain, but maybe, at that time, she
could inwardly smile at the thought that her biological destiny
had presented her with such a difficult adolescent. Very quickly
though we’re back to the usual way of doing things. Her patience,
her calm, her seemingly endless wisdom in understanding, spring
from a source deep within her. But she will never be more demon-
strative than this. There are no sudden embraces, no pet-names,
no uncalled-for affectionate kisses, no light laughter, no playful
teasing, no letting-one’s-hair down, no messing about.

Nor was there ever. I myself lack the capacity for at least two or
three of those. We live in conditions of withdrawal and reserve,
which is not the same as living solemnity or dullness or indif-
erence, nor does it exclude—not by any means—warmth, kind-
ness, solicitude, gaiety and a sense of humour cloaked in deli-
crate irony, something I am particularly fond of. I have instinctively
grown used, to some degree at least, to seeking what was miss-
ing in her in others: ever since I was born I have received generous
helpings of them from Gizi, my godmother whom I adore, and, in
her simple, modest way, from Fräulein too. Later I look for these
qualities in girls, in women, with wildly varying results. But all in
vain, since anything you were not given by your mother, indeed
anything she did actually give you, will not be found anywhere
else. That is my definitive experience. I have been feeling closer to
her recently, ever since she died in fact. For a long time I believed
she was a simple soul: that she lived by instinct alone, was preju-
diced, was incapable of articulating her feelings, impressions and
passions, or only doing so when she was forced to and absolutely
had to take a position on something. Then I realised I was wrong.
She had a complex, rich, many-layered inner life, consisting not
only of immediate feeling but of the tastes and ways of thinking
traditional to her family and class. Over and over again in my head
I replay the most memorable things she said, examining and ana-
lysing them, and I always come to the same conclusion. Her opin-
ions were thought through, never spur-of-the-moment or improvised, but properly considered and, when called upon, she could present excellent, concise arguments for them. She had outstanding moral judgment, impeccable taste and her understanding of human character was all but infallible. She was not a snob but open and kindly, never condescending even in the genteel role of ‘madam’, as she was to the servants for example. She was no blue-stockings of course, but was reasonably well-read. It was thanks to her that I was introduced to Balzac and Dickens in my early adolescence, at a time when I was still reading Karl May and Jules Verne. In her later years she enjoyed reading Churchill’s memoirs. She had studied at a girls’ grammar school in Arad, her Transylvanian hometown, and, after the Romanian occupation, when her family—a fully Hungarianised landowning family of ancient Serbian origin, some of whose members played important roles in Hungarian history—fled to Pest, she studied the violin with Hubay, as long as they could afford it, which was not long. The photograph of the long-haired, slender, beautiful teenage girl passionately playing her violin—if one can go by such evidence—seems to indicate that she was deeply imbued with the love of music. When the money ran out, she told me, they presented the violin to a poor, blind child genius. In view of that it is surprising that she never showed the least interest in music later. Might she have taken offence at the hand fate had dealt her? Not one concert, not one visit to the Opera. The programme of classical selections on the radio at lunchtime on Sunday—it was always on while we were eating—represented the entire musical diet of the family. Maybe that was because my father had absolutely no interest in music. From early childhood on I would pick at the keys of my godmother’s wonderful Steinway grand—a present from the Regent Horthy—and was strongly drawn to music, but year after year they kept rejecting my plea for lessons, dismissing it as a passing, infantile fancy. It was the only thing they ever refused me. Even today I can’t forgive them for it.

But what I chiefly desire is to have her tell me stories. I want her to answer my questions, to annoy her by making provocative remarks, to correct her, instruct her, occasionally to cause her overt pain, to punish her, to let her know that she is my intellectual inferior, to confuse her and mock her and, immediately after having done so, somehow to convey to her how helplessly mortified I feel, to show that I know I have hurt her; but I can’t quite say it, cannot quite bring myself to apologise, not even to mention the thing that continues mournfully to rattle around inside me like a sheet of newspaper caught on the railings. Not even when she appears to have put it all behind her. Even today when I dream of these things as have passed between us, I experience such a sharp pang of conscience that it feels like a pain in my chest and I wake up in a sweat. But she is capable of retaliating, not out of revenge, but in self-defence, and she can upset me too as when, for example, I ask some question about the family and she retorts: fat lot you cared about the family back then! What did her aristocratic ancestry—which is mine too by the way—the aristocracy of which at a certain time in my life I was so deeply and genuinely ashamed, those historical names, matter to me then?

I wasn’t even interested in the legendary patriotic general who was executed by the Habsburgs with twelve others at Arad in 1849. And grandmother, who was a baroness, she couldn’t help it, what was my problem with her? Today, grandfather’s ornate family tree, hand-painted in bright colours on parchment with all the coats of arms going back six generations, hangs on the wall of my flat along with pictures of other famous ancestors. Right now she happens to be cooking, cooking for me in that kitchen and as she does so, she is half turned to me, in a slightly demonstrative pose as I see it, while merrily chattering on, a pose in which there is no little pride. Her tall slender figure is an elegant exclamation mark in the humble kitchen: see! I can cook! She wants to prove—she is always trying to prove something—that she has learned to cook, and not just any old how. Before, she could manage—when she had to—a soup or two, semolina pudding, an omelette, a slice of veal, a bit of French toast, and not
much more. She tied a green-and-white checked apron over her
cream coloured silk blouse, her string of pearls (a cheap yet pretty
piece of bijouterie, the real thing having vanished into the Soviet
Union), her smart beige herringbone skirt, her stockings, her ele-
gant, narrow but, by-now, not-too-high heeled shoes.
She wore these things until it was time for bed (having discarded
the apron of course), wearing the same clothes she wore to the
office, not even removing her shoes, which is the first thing I do
as soon as I get in, here, as I do at home. Or rather there, as at my
home. She can’t understand why the shoes bother me.
Slippers are for wearing only at night before bed, or on waking
up. During the day it’s so non-soigné, she says, Hungaricising the
words to sound: unszóányírt. I hate this verbal monstrosity with its
German prefix and French descriptor domesticated for home use: it
looks even worse written down, something like a mole cricket.
I had heard it in childhood from her sisters and my cousins. It must
have originated in Arad, presumably inherited from a series of
German and French governesses. Naturally, I tick her off, not for
the first time, gently but with an obviously annoying superiority,
and tell her how many different ways there might be of conveying
the same idea in Hungarian, so there is no reason to use a foreign
word, especially not one so horrible. She is offended, of course,
but does not show it; I am sorry, of course, but I don’t show it. We
fall silent. We often find conversation difficult in any case or stick
to small talk. We are not particularly talkative people, either of us.
Not with each other, at least.
The veal with caper sauce turns out to be perfect. I had never
tasted it before. Back home whole generations had grown up
never having heard of capers. I must have eaten one last when I
was a child, when it shimmered in the middle of a ring of anchovy,
like the eye of some sea-creature: that’s how I remember it. The
flavour is familiar and yet entirely new. She is watching me to see
how I react to her cooking. Do I like the capers, she asks. I don’t let
her take pleasure in it: so what if you can get capers in America,
you can get anything here we can’t get at home.

Occasionally you can get bananas at home now, I answer on the
spur of the moment with Lilliputian self-importance, and there
were oranges too just before Christmas. One had to queue up
for them, of course, I add for the sake of objectivity. Really? She
asks in a slightly disappointed voice. In my opinion she should
feel cheered by this. Could she have forgotten what a banana or
orange means to us there? We carry on eating. I sense that
the caper sauce, the grilled veal and the whole baked potato
in aluminium foil was a long planned-for surprise, one of many,
intended for me. It’s a real American thing. Later she lists all the
other dishes she can cook, just you see. And it turns out that in her
free time she sometimes bakes cakes too, for Hungarian acquaint-
ances, and acquaintances of acquaintances, bakes them to order,
for money. So far I only had known—that and was because she
told me in a letter—that she occasionally baby-sat, chiefly for
Hungarians but also for some American families, and that she had
had some amusing evenings with naughty children who did not
speak Hungarian, who might, for example, lock her into the bath-
room for hours. Most recently she made ten dollars baking a huge
Sacher-torte, she proudly tells me. She buys the ingredients and
calculates her fee, which, it seems, is the going rate in Hungar-
ian circles, makes up the bill according to the cost of raw mate-
rials and often delivers the cake directly to the house. It some-
times happens, she tells me, giggling, that strangers offer her tips.
Does she accept them? Of course, why not? I have to take a deep
breath. These earnings, taken together with the modest income
she has scraped together, have paid for parcels of clothes, chosen
with exquisite taste, that would arrive at my home on the Groza
Embankment and later for children’s toys and clothes at the flat
in Vércse Street. And clearly my airfare too, as well as the ample
pocket money she has been giving me while here in New York
come from the delicious torte as well as the soiled nappies. The
People’s Republic had, somewhat unwillingly, allowed me five
dollars of hard currency for my three-month visit. It is my mother
who keeps me; a rather disturbing feeling at age thirty-four. She
bakes four or five different sorts of cake, following the recipe in the book of course, and all eminently successful bar the caramel-topped *dobos* layer-cake, she tells me. Caramel is hard to handle. She pronounces it *kaahraahmell*, with wide open ‘aahs’, not long, in the regional Palóc mode, but quite short, like the German ‘a’. This irritates me no end, I don’t know why. It has been aah, aah, aah all the way—*aahkaahdémia, aahgresszív, aahttitűd*, right down to *kaahpri* (capers) and *kaahraahmell*—ever since I can remember. And *maahszek* too, the colloquial word for semi-private undertakings. This time I don’t stop myself pointing out that this is not a foreign word, but a Hungarian portmanteau, combining ‘ma’, pronounced ‘muh’, from *magán* (private) and *szek* from *szektor* (sector). It is a form of what we call an acronym, I add; adds the conceited, repulsive litterateur, her son. She does not answer. She has no counter-argument. She carries on saying *maahszek* and *aahkaahdémia*. We eat. As a child I used to enjoy watching her as she adjusted the food on her plate with great topographic precision, shifting it here and there with careful, tiny, sweeping movements of knife and fork, like the director on the set of a film, arranging the shots and instructing the cast before rolling the camera. She pushes the meat to the right side of the plate, the garnish being neatly separated and ranged on the left. Turning the plate one way or the other is common, an unspoken taboo. She cuts and spears a small piece from the meat, loads the appropriate amount of garnish on the round back of the fork and so carries it to her mouth. This is a far from simple operation, as may be demonstrated now, since the caper seeds would drop from the fork were they not perfectly balanced there and flattened together a little, did not the speared piece of meat or potato block their escape route, and did she not lean progressively closer and lower over her plate with every bite so that they might find their way into her mouth all the sooner. When the garnish includes peas, which means that only a few peas succeed in remaining on the curve of the fork behind the meat, that is to say leaving a surfeit of peas on the plate, she is forced to consume extra forkfuls of peas only. But she has a strategy for coping with that too. Using the knife she spears a few peas that will support a few slightly squashed ones behind them. I have seen others deploy this technique but while they shift and prod the peas about, creating a mess on the plate, she manages to eat them in an undeniably elegant and distinguished manner. It is all done with great skill and grace. She divides the meat, the garnish and the salad so that everything disappears from the plate at precisely the same time, every piece of meat with its due portion of garnish and vice versa. She never leaves any food on the plate. Nor do I. She has lived through the meagre rationing and starvation of two world wars, I only one. Any sauce or juice left on the flat dish, however runny, is conveyed to her mouth with the fork. One simply can’t imagine her using a spoon. She leans forward and makes rapid spooning movements with the fork, turning it up a little so there’s still a moment before dripping and thus she can safely steer it into her mouth. This spectacular technique requires close attention and speed; it demands a lot of time and energy, but it works. She turns the obvious pointlessness of it into a display of elegance. I eat the same way myself, ever since being allowed to dine with the adults, as did the German Fräulein, the whole act having made a great impression on her. But to the two of us it is like a private second language, and while we often make mistakes, it is the equivalent of a mother tongue to her, it is what she grew up doing, quite possibly never seeing any other way of eating, only this. My father, whose education had been under quite different circumstances, ate differently. That which could not be speared, he swept into the hollow of the fork and stuffed into his mouth. If sauce remained on the plate and he fancied it he was quite happy to spoon it up, if he didn’t fancy it he simply left it. If there were no guests he would dip his bread in, sometimes on the end of the fork but sometimes with his hands! He was allowed to. He was the only one. In my first days at the university canteen I was laughed out of countenance as I was unmasked as a trueblooded bourgeois leftover from the
old regime when, out of habit, I started employing my mother's technique. The class-alien aspect of the art must have been painfully obvious, a blind man could see, you didn't have to be a Marxist-Leninist to recognise it. Ever since then, when it comes to eating, my strategies are somewhat eclectic, though lately, since I have been dining alone, I have fallen into decadent ways; she out there, on the other hand, alone, is almost certain to have continued using her fork to spoon the sauce to the day she died.

Silence. She clears the table. She starts on the washing-up while I watch, she having refused my help. Her hair still looks chestnut brown and though this is merely a matter of appearances, there is no grey there. Her face is animated, refined, gentle, very beautiful, her eyes warm though she will soon be sixty.

I understand why in the thirties the Budapest tabloid press referred to her as 'one of the most beautiful women in town'. The ritual of the nightly removal of makeup—though, of course, I am not watching this from bed now as I used to but walking up and down behind her, chatting to her, recounting my round of affairs of the day in New York—is quite unchanged right down to the 'shaking lotion' and the same old movements, it's only the lovely antique mirrors that are missing.

The face that looks back at her from the cheap mirror now is still a feminine face, all attention: she can still take delight in life, is still curious, still wants to see everything. There is no trace in her of the expression you catch on other déclassé immigrants, the cynical hanger-on's don't-blame-me look. She has not walled herself in, become a solitary, she has not been distorted by the enormity and the harsh bustle of the alien world that now surrounds her. She is just the same as she had been in prison when sharing a cell with eight others. Having made subtle enquiries and going by what is around her, I know she is alone, though I had hoped she might have a man in her life. There is no way of asking her this directly, as it is something we never speak about. Grandmother brought up her three girls, she being the youngest of them, to avoid even the most harmless romantic literature, even that in which the attractive, and in every respect impeccable, young suitor makes so bold as merely to touch the innocent maiden's hand in the long awaited last chapter at the point of engagement. She would glue the last pages together or simply cut them out with scissors, believing such episodes to be unseemly. My mother addressed the issue in less radical fashion, in the way that best suited her: it simply didn't exist. My sexual education at home consisted of a single short sentence that I first heard at the age of about four or five when the words first issued from her lips at a time when I lay in bed with some infection, possibly influenza: You are not to play with your peepee. That was it. My father said even less. He said nothing. So I became an autodidact in the subject.

Her circle consisted of a few relatives and female friends, all Hungarian, two of them quite close to her. I suspect, I sense, I see, since she practically radiates it, that she lives entirely, exclusively, for me, and that this, for the time being, is as certain as can be.

That is because I have chosen to remain there, because I chose not to come with her. That is why she scrimp and saved, that is what she was preparing herself for all her life here. Almost as soon as I arrived the first thing she did was to take me to a medium-range department store and, bearing my tastes in mind, equip me with several suits of clothes, from top to bottom, the way she might a child, that is to say her son, whom she has now had on loan for three months. There were certain items of my own clothing that I had to throw out: she absolutely insisted on that.

There is a photograph of her, some thirty years back in Színházi Élet, a magazine for theatre lovers, showing her playing patience with Gizi Bajor, the actress. Gizi is dealing out the cards while she looks on attentively, smoking, turning the signet ring with her thumb the way she used to. And there it still is, miraculously, the golden signet ring, next to her engagement ring: she doesn't take
it off, not even while washing-up. When I was a little boy I desper-ately wanted to have one of those. Engraved into the deep-red ruby, under a five-point crown, a tiny knight-on-horseback galloping to the right holds high his sword, a moustached head, bald save a single wisp, obviously a Turk's, impaled on it. Patiently and wisely she would explain to me time and again that I couldn’t have one because it was not mine to possess, because even my father didn’t have one.

It hurt me, it infuriated me, it brought me out in a fever: I simply couldn’t accept that I was unworthy of it. I, I alone, unworthy! When I could get anything else I wanted! It was the first time I felt the limits of my world and I couldn’t understand it, couldn’t get used to it. Yet how fine it would be turning it round on my finger while talking, as she did! To answer questions in a careless fash-

Several years, some eras later, I upbraid her on account of the ring. Before the gimnázium is nationalised in 1948 and I am still at the Cistercian school—but have become an avid consumer of the works of Hungarian novelists, poets, sociologists and historians, most of whom are outside the Church-approved curriculum, and am fervently committed to the cause of equality—I get embar-

She spends her evenings at this time removing, at my stubborn insistence, the embroidered five-point crown above the mono-

There are things to take pride in and wonder at in the little kitchen. For example there is a never-before seen gadget, the electric tin-

We move into the living-room, though she uses the English term with a little apologetic smile, since she could hardly call it a salon, the word we used to refer to the spacious sitting-room in the Buda villa of my childhood. This small space is dark even in day-

Pretty soon, in November 1949, they arrest her on a trumped-up, patently absurd charge of panicmongering.

“Who are you fucking, you stuck-up whore?” asks her first interro-

There is a possessor of pliers, chisels, files, a range of screws and keys, measuring tapes and insulating tapes, keeping them all in a pro-

The dictator itself so to speak pushes it on my finger, as I too am a ‘class-alien’. Now I fear for her and try to persuade her to remove it because she could get into trouble wearing it. She won’t listen to me. She has worn it all her adult life, she will not disown her fam-

family, she is not ashamed of her ancestors, she tells me rather sharply. Pretty soon, in November 1949, they arrest her on a trumped-up, patently absurd charge of panicmongering.

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The dictator itself so to speak pushes it on my finger, as I too am a ‘class-alien’. Now I fear for her and try to persuade her to remove it because she could get into trouble wearing it. She won’t listen to me. She has worn it all her adult life, she will not disown her fam-
why I have to keep the curtains drawn, even in the daytime. There are a couple of engravings on the wall in slightly clumsily fixed ready-made frames. In terms of furniture I see two ancient, much worn, and in every respect dissimilar, fauteuils that might charitably be referred to as antiques, and two, just as dissimilar, also mock-antique, little tables, as well as a spindly baby-sized chest of drawers on barley-sugar legs, matching the rest only by virtue of imitation. These she has purchased, piece by piece, as and when opportunity afforded, from a thrift-shop, that is to say a store where are sold all kinds of cheap things abandoned or passed on by gentlefolk for charitable purposes. Some ornaments on the table, a few minor antique items of bric-à-brac, of silver, copper and porcelain, a photograph in a silver frame, a lovely old ashtray; most of them Csernovics and Damjanich family relics that I had brought from home on request. They obligingly made themselves at home here, as if, indeed, coming home. There are vases on the tables and, as has always been the case, there are flowers in them. The style is familiar: these are obvious signs of her refined taste, obvious only to me of course. I myself lived with her beautiful antique furniture, on Sas Hill, right to the end of the war. She used to collect the tiny bits of polished dark-brown veneer that had flaked or fallen off them and keep them in a tin cigarette-box: from time to time a skilled joiner would come and glue them back on with surgical precision as if they were missing pieces of a jigsaw, and there the furniture would be: repaired, impeccable, brilliantly glossy and majestic once more. Let such things be about her even now, however cheap, however fake, if only to serve for atmosphere, as compensation for the world that was once hers, so she may feel at home. This desire has crossed the ocean with her, it and she are inseparable companions, they are what she is, like her past, like her ring, like those capers balanced on the back of her fork, like the aakaaahdémia. And all this moves me, though I don’t, of course, show it.

Translated by George Szirtes

Pál Závada

JADVIGA’S PILLOW
(excerpt from a novel)

Zachinam tuto knyizhechku.1 I, András Osztatní, am starting this little notebook on the 5th day of the month of February, 1915, just one day before my wedding. Restless and fired with anticipation, sleep escapes me, and so I will now take out my note book, which I bought at Binder’s for the sum of one crown 40. (The minute I laid eyes on it, I was taken with the soft lilac lines on the sheets, and the indigo-colored cloth binding, and I made up my mind to use it for my Diary as soon as I could call myself a married man). The clock has just struck midnight, and so I can now record that today, it being the 6th day of the month of February, 1915, I will lead Mária Jadviga Palkovits to the altar as my newly wedded bride. Dyakovaty pana Bohu,2 may the Good Lord be praised that I have lived to see this day.

(…)

The first time I approached Mother, resolved if weak in the knees, after she heard me out she turned as red as pickled beet, and while her komondor growled menacingly she advanced, huffing and puffing, backing me up against the wall. “Cho?, zhse koho?, chsooo?” she repeated, first choking with rage, then screaming

1. I shall now begin this small work.
2. Praise be the Lord, in the Slovak language.
and yelling so hard, the windowpanes trembled, What’s this? Who would I marry? And also, that you will study, not marry, understand?! Though she was never one to curb her tongue, I have never seen her quite so incoherent with rage. We were practically at fisticuffs when the dog growled at me again, so I thought better of it and fled to the kitchen, and Mother slammed the door. We didn’t speak to each other for two weeks, but then I couldn’t take it any more, and one night I said to her, “Let’s talk it over…” She stopped me with a wave of the hand and snapped, “Chobi vas chert zobrav, tak si ju veznyi,” i.e., what does she care?! I was surprised that she had changed her mind like this, and elated, too, though she quickly added, “Considering how blind and deaf you are, she’s got you over a barrel, son.” (“You let her lead you by the nose, son, didn’t you?”) And that I don’t even care about the difference in our ages, and that her smell has made me lose what little sound sense I may have once possessed. (To tell the truth, Mamovka used the word smrad which, as we know, means stink, because she’s not used to Jadviga’s lotions and perfumes. As far as I’m concerned, they make my head spin. Once on the way back from visiting her, I stopped in Vienna and bought some of the camphor ointment she uses, and I kept sniffing at it, sometimes until my head reeled, which is how it was until I could see her again many months later.) I wasn’t offended by Mother’s gruff manner though; I would have liked to hug her and thank her, but she rebuffed me, saying I should let her good enough alone. Still, I was happy, though once again it was no thanks to me that Mamovka changed her mind in my favor. In this manner was the rosemary fragrance of our love born from the noxious brimstone fumes of Mother’s curses and the camphor scent of my true intended.

(…)

3. In short, the devil take the both of you, go marry her.
The truth is, she is infinitely more sour and forbidding since the loss of her daughter, for now it is but the two of us; my older sister Zsofka, who was a bride to be, we buried just four months before Apovka's death, in October, 1913, our poor unplucked lily-flower. She was the apple of Mamovka's eye, the daughter on whom she bestowed her name, and in whom she saw her former maiden self. It was for her she had planned a grand wedding like this, I know that, and not for me. And when my time would come, she thought, it would certainly be with somebody else.

She wanted me to marry the girl who was Zsofka's constant companion, and whom I would not offend for the world by setting down her name, the girl I did not want, whereas she always entertained certain hopes of me.

Incidentally, I saw her again three days ago at the Hromnyice-Day ball, where she danced through the night with my friend Pali Rosza, may the Lord be praised. It was there, at the Mária Day Smallholders' dance and her Name's Day, that I first appeared with Jadviga in public, and I was as proud as a peacock with my lovely bride, who was dancing as a maiden for the last time in her life.

This morning, I dashed over to the other house for Jadviga (it was built by Apovka for Zsofka, but now we are going to live in it). "Come along," I said to her, dragging her across the garden. I then opened the cellar with the big key, and led my wonder-struck bride down the stairs to the oleander wintering in the large cauldron. "Pluck me a spray of rosemary," I said, "and stick it in my hat!" We laughed when she did this, and embraced, and then I said, "I had better be off, and so must you, lest someone should see us," even though it was not somebody else who did not want us to be seen together that day (or even custom, which is not especially strict on this point), but her.

If there was no separate bride's house and groom's house, she wanted to be spared for one more day, at least, the ordeal of greeting a hoard of chicken and cake bearing relatives. Besides, she felt a cold coming on and preferred drawing the curtains in the new house and inhaling a brew of herbal teas, and applying her camphorous ointments to fend off an attack of migraine on her big day. "Also," she said, "I need time to think, Dear. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh," I said, stroking her, "there is nothing I wouldn't do for you," though I knew perfectly well that Mother wouldn't leave this, either, without comment. Mamovka Drahá! Mamo, Mother dear! If only the Good Lord would soften her heart!

I have just put that spray of rosemary into my wedding suit pocket (having read the other day in "A Practical Guide" that this is the way), and I also crumbled some between my fingers, because it smells so nice when I raise them to my nostrils. I will also take out the camphor ointment, possibly for the last time, so I can pine for its mistress, who will soon be mine for ever.

For this little note book, and for myself, too (and for myself only), I will first set down how I won my Jadviga's hand in marriage, so that I may recall it until my dying day. I will write it down starting tomorrow, after I am a married man. Right now I feel very tired.

*  

8 February, 1915

(…) I shall write more about my wedding (which went without a hitch mostly), especially my wedding night, at a later date. (Actually, even though four nights have passed, it hasn’t happened yet, not really, in its natural way, even though we have mutually assured each other of our amorous intentions—gentle stroking, etc. I haven’t slept a wink for days, what with transports of ecstasy and extreme agitation vying for supremacy.)

*
9 February

I will now set our story down on paper, as promised, from the beginning, though our present situation, and most especially our nights—I would not forget any of it, for the world. (Perhaps it could lead to insight, or serve as a lesson.) But that will come bye and bye.

So then. Having harnessed Zephyr at the crack of dawn, I was soon off the farm, saying I had to give Gregor his orders, whereas it is not Gregor at all who needs ordering, but me, for crying out loud, me, inside.

My Jadviga got up with me, an angelic smile on her face, whereas she couldn’t have slept much either, and she gave me clean linen and ranyaika,5 toasted bread in the stove (old granny Balhov had fired it up by then), and spread duck fat on top. I stealthily pocketed my small note book (I have pen and ink out on the farm), and we parted with a kiss.

I quickly gave Gregor his orders, dispatching him to do the harrowing, though he knows what he has got to do perfectly well, without me having to tell him. But hold on. Who am I trying to kid? If only this weren’t a Diary! I can’t send Gregor off anywhere, least of all to do the harrowing; I need him to tell me whether it is harrowing that’s on the agenda today, or possibly something else.

(...)
breath quickened, and her hips, too, quivered ever so slightly, with barely perceptible, convulsive little spasms.

We could not escape the wedding feast and retire to our room until very late. The more hardy of our guests, my friends Pali Rosza, Szvetlik and the others, had a grand time of it, and towards dawn had the band play marches only, and kept kicking the wooden floor with their boots so it nearly collapsed under them, but then they persuaded the girls to join them once again, and they danced to Slovak songs. It was at that point that we left. We glanced at each other, and off we went. (I told only Miki Buchbinder, but not Mamovka, who was in the kitchen, out back.)

We ran to the house that from now on would be our new home hand in hand, and the icy air refreshed me. Not wishing to grow drowsy and weak and get a bad stomach, I drank in moderation throughout the night, and though I ate a hearty meal (especially Boszák’s excellent stew), I was able to relieve myself before we sneaked away, and to reduce the painful bloating. (I have often wondered while passing wind at night under the covers—because it’s not like passing water, when you can relieve yourself and be done with it; with wind you must wait patiently for it to happen, not to mention the fact that you can not stay in the john for hours!—in short, I have often asked myself what it would be like with two of us in bed? And would the bloating, which can be excruciatingly painful at times, stand in the way of the body’s labor of love, for with its abdominal excitations, that likewise stimulates the bowels. And will that mean a disillusioning dash for the bathroom? Or what?)

We did not immediately divest ourselves of our clothing (having changed at midnight, she was wearing her “new wife’s dress”), but leaning against the lukewarm stove and each other, too, we talked in whispers about the wedding and how well it had turned out. (However, I had first kicked off my boots and turned the lamp down a bit.) Later, Jadviga slipped out to the dark kitchen and washed herself in the porcelain wash basin. I peeked, and though I could see nothing, she reprimanded me, so I turned up the bed in the meantime. She came back fully dressed, and after I had also rinsed the sweat from under my arms, what’s more (something I normally did only when I took my regular bath), I hastily splashed water on my privates as well and came back to the bedroom, she was sitting on the ottoman as before. I kissed her then, and she suffered it, but I did not feel her arousal as I had done the last time. When I began to fumble with the buttons of her gown, she stayed my hand. Go slowly, she whispered, and that she would rather do it herself, and the other side, that’s yours, Ondrisko. And she pushed me away. She then slipped out of her clothes, I could hear, and then she sat on the side of the bed in her nightgown. I pulled off my trousers, but after some hesitation, leaving my shirt and drawers on, I got in on the other side and touched her. I leaned over her and embraced her, and since she was still partly sitting up, and me pushing her down, she finally relented. Instantly, this gave me such a hard-on my body went into convulsions. But soothing my more urgent gestures, for her part she asked that we remain still and just lull each other in an embrace. I did not care. Light-headed with her smell, I snuggled up to her, and since this time I was not vehement, she let me. And though I liked this, besides which I am by disposition not a fighter, my palm started slipping up her cheek just the same, then her neck, then her arm, then from below, from the knee, carefully working its way upwards. But she stopped my hand, saying I should move closer instead. Inviting and repulsing me at the same time, I thought, at which I plucked up the courage to lie full length against her right side (she was lying on her back, and me on my left side); cautiously, I laid my throbbing member on her thigh, and—there is no denying it—when she felt this, it made her shiver, and she shied away, but later, as we lay there without moving, she did not object to my lying so close on top of her. Still, though we were kissing passionately, when I tried to raise her gown with my right hand, again she would not suffer it.

And so it went. Kissing and snuggling, breathing ecstatically—that was all right, but finding my way to her lap, that was out. “Let
us divest ourselves of our clothes”, I entreated (having first discarded my shirt). After much persuasion, she let me pull her gown up over her head, but she hooked a finger into the hem of her silken drawers, that was out, and she made me promise we’d lie quietly side by side, just the way we were. However, she could not prevent me from divesting myself of my own drawers, and I was in seventh heaven as I snuggled up naked to her thighs (to the extent that the leg of her drawers would allow as it slipped up), and her right breast, too, not to mention the moment when, presently, I could touch the left. I could stroke her everywhere then, except the waist of her drawers, she would not let me touch that, she would not let me near her lap, despite my fevered embraces, and I tried to force her thighs open with my knees to no avail. Yet she was highly excited herself, I am sure of that, and not just me. She addressed unforgettable, endearing words to me, as I to her, but she asked me to be patient, etc., let’s get used to each other first, let’s be satisfied with what we have. But I, such is human nature, could hardly contain myself at this point, and when she felt my breath turning more and more uncontrollably vehement, and me pressing against her thigh with all my might, she grabbed me round the waist, tightened her embrace, and began rocking herself slowly back and forth, and me, too, and she whispered, panting, no, don’t, take it easy, my dear! takto, takto! yes!, and while I rolled her drawers down her waist with my trembling fingers, so I could press my erection against her bare skin at least, we ended up holding on to each other for dear life in a quickening rocking motion, until the juices of my passion trickled down her marble thigh. The bed spun round with me, and my breathing came so heavy, it scorched my insides, tears of joy and gratitude flooded my soul, though mixed with shame, to be sure, but as I lay panting on her shoulder, Jadviga calmed, hushed, and soothed me as if I were a child, and whispered, dobre, it’s all right, my dear, it’s all right. Dobre, Milyi moy, dobre!

Today, it being the 1st of March, 1915, is my wife’s 28th birthday. I have a necklace for her. I will give it to her this evening. If only we could give ourselves to each other, too, entirely tonight! For I yearn to be in my Jadviga’s lap at long last; I yearn to relieve not only my body, which throbs with want of her, but since her obscure ‘confession’, my soul, too, into the bargain, tormented to its utmost limits with doubt. Perhaps I will also light upon the certainty I seek, possibly reassuring, as I now hope, or even the kind that, though it will corroborate my worst fears, will mercifully put an end to this unbearable state of suspicion.

But this gives pause for reflection. Could the painful certainty be preferable to this nagging doubt? Could it offer relief? Or will the opposite happen, and our love, which has not yet matured into unreserved giving, yet, despite its struggles, is profound (and may grow still more profound in our laps)—could our love, I say, be undermined by the mounting grievances? I do not know. However, let the inevitable have its way; let it come, if for no other reason, then because she is my wife, a fact I would rather not remind her of. My patience is at an end, husband and wife sharing a bed, every single daybreak with teeth clenched, and virgins still! Could her heart be harboring stories of which I am ignorant?

Translated by Judith Sollosy
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