



**CONSTELLATIONS,
MOONS, AND WATER**

Karen Gunderson

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Constellations, Moons, and Water
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With an essay by Mark Daniel Cohen

Cratering the Light

The Luminous Lifting of the Soul in the Art of Karen Gunderson

by Mark Daniel Cohen

It would be well, after so long a departure from the considerations of maturity in our cultures, to give witness to the mark of the fully matured artist — for there is no other issue so pertinent to and revealing of the indispensable virtues of the art of Karen Gunderson.

The impress of the maturation of the artist's work is the ability to make the foundational component of the artist's medium as distinctively and indelibly as a fingerprint. That base component, that essential aspect of the artist's art, is the root of the principle upon which the work is conceived, it is the brick out of which the edifice of the artwork is constructed, and its laws are the laws of the work as a whole. Its nature is the nature of the art itself; it is the work in small. Or rather, the artwork is the single phrase, the individual gesture, writ large. For the writer, it is the sentence and the clause; for the sculptor, it is the surface texture; for the composer, it is the musical phrase; for the painter, it is the brush stroke.

However, it would be far more to the purpose to observe that the foundational component is not so much the most rudimentary physical element of the material work as it is the core principle of manipulation of the medium. For the writer, it is the manipulation of verbal thought; for the sculptor, the orchestration of tangible form; for the composer, the choreography of sound and with it, automatically, directly, emotion; and for the painter, the dispensation of light.

These are more the means by which the artist manipulates the responses of the witnesses of the work. These are the letters and terms, the inflections and colorations, the inclinations and configurations, by which the artist speaks, by which the artist is able to speak at all. They are the language of the art, for they are fractal. The variety of ways they can configure the field of the artwork are the sum total of its aspect. They compound and orchestrate the language of the work for they are — in the most literal sense of the nature of the artwork — all that it is. A work of art can say only what its component gestures do.

For the marks that compose, for all the gestures that make up and animate the anatomy of the work to be meaningful, they must be individual, they must be a language of the artist's own making, a language, a style, that is unique in its totality, distinctive in its overall outline, for in art as in all forms of thought and expression, in all manners of human exchange, it is profoundly difficult to mean anything at all. One of the primary laws of thought, one of the first truths of it that becomes evident to one devoting it serious attention, is that thought is continuously subject to suggestibility.

We are all given to it. Much of what we convey in all the ways in which we convey to each other is not truly rooted and is without serious intent. Our signal gestures are rarely signal. We contribute to each other a nearly continuous flow of expressions — verbal and otherwise — that are largely viral. We catch them like the symptoms of a disease and hardly are aware of what we spread. Our intentions are largely a function of inattention, our words repetitions of things we barely heard and hardly hear ourselves saying again. On the whole, expression is not communication — it is epidemic.

And that is why the tools of art — and of all forms of serious-minded reflection, communication, and feeling and thought — are only secondarily and as a by-product tools of expression. They are primarily the intellectual implements for digging. They are the mechanisms of the imagination, by which the artist explores the plummet deeps of the artist's own nature, to discover what can be said, what needs to be said, what is truly intended — what must be given its voice, and its voice is the language that is the

artist's very art. The tools of art are among the few means we have for eluding superficiality, for achieving the profundity that otherwise evades us, and for being ourselves individually, when we otherwise are only blended victims of the contagion of apparent meaning, paleness of purpose, and mere existence. Their primary work is committed and fully accomplished before the work is finalized and given to the world. That is why what they convey to others is only aftermath, side effect, the mere remains of a project whose truer purpose was the desperately imperative drive to discover, in the center of the artist's most essential self, what can be known in no other way.

Meaning is hard, almost unachievable, as we so often press down on a thought only to feel it slip out from under our mental fingers, and we discover that there was nothing supporting it other than something impossibly vague or merely overheard — the movement of the empty sleeve of a ghost. Meaning is hard; it must be probed in the foundations of the mind. And so it is the personality, the individual nature of the individual mind, that is its root. For meaning is also indispensable. One must be capable of meaning something — deliberate, clear, and precise in its intention — in order to have a meaning, personally and for oneself, in order to be meaningful. To be at all, one must be an individual. To exist is thus a function of determination, of deliberateness, of possessing the clarity of thought to know one's mind, distinct and apart from all others — to live is necessarily to live deliberately.

And thus art must be continuously remade in the artist's image. For the nullity is anonymity. Regardless of the subject at issue, regardless of the matter to which the attention of the artist is turned, the artist's identity must never be in doubt. The statement that could be made by anyone has been made by no one, and is the assertion of nothing whatever, for it is merely the trading in acquired phrasings, in information exchanged as commodity, whose significance grows fainter with every passage. The voice must be distinctive, unmistakable, thoroughly personal, for it to be a voice, and a principle of articulation. For it to be meaningful, the voice must be the origin of meaning — unique, unmistakable from that of anyone else, yet strangely, immediately, humanly understandable.

In the visual arts, there are few artists working today who forged so distinct an individual voice, few who have generated a style and a language of aesthetic conception and transformation of such innovation and renewal, as Karen Gunderson. It is a rare thing to see the work of an artist who creates as if everything about her medium were known to her — so well versed is she in the history of her craft — and at the same time as if everything about her medium new and previously unknown to her — so much is she unencumbered by it, uncaged by it, so far has she gone to rethink the very nature and practice of painting.

Gunderson paints as if she were reformulating the art form of painting from the ground up. Her style, her manner of execution and thus her imagination — her capability of dreaming, discovery, and inner sight — is thoroughly new, completely her own, literally something not seen before. Her work is not the next step in a line of innovation that constitutes one thread in a modern tradition. It is not a pastiche of influences arranged in a pattern and through a computation of proportions that are moderately different from all other contemporary compounds. Her work is *sui generis*. She has conjured a technical innovation entirely of her own making and she has welded it into a style that resembles no one else. She creates as if her work were its own tradition, and she does so even as she practices a craft so carefully executed, she pays homage with every brush stroke to the great work that has preceded her.

It is a rare thing to discover, and it should be missed by no one interested in the nature not just of painting or of visual art, but of art itself. Gunderson has shown her work internationally, on four continents, in numerous solo and group exhibitions, but one can never see her art enough, and her exhibition of nine new works at ClampArt, “Karen Gunderson: Constellations, Moons, and Water,” is an opportunity to see her extending her technical innovations into new ranges of effect and aesthetic insight.

However, what is primarily evident in this exhibition is what is always evident in Gunderson’s work, what is evident only when authentic and fully mature works of art are present: the very essence of the human spirit, vivified and renewed, as the very na-

ture of art is vivified and renewed by the discovery and practice of the unique, individual voice, by the renewal of meaning and intention that can be obtained only through access to the center of the human soul.

Art is the molten fusion of the hand and the soul. The impulse to create is something more than just the self-appointed engaging in invention — it is a hurtle at the hinge-point of an impossibility: to render as real and palpable the inward realm of an aromatic and shimmering existence, to build as hard fact the fleeting reflection of another region in which we also have our lives, and in which we all live a more lilting experience. To make art is to fashion the delicately braiding fire, it is to ignite a universally familiar light out of the dull materials of the duller earth — it is to call down to the soil a quiet and entrancing flame and to see that, as the Renaissance poet John Nashe wrote, “brightness falls from the air.” The accomplishment of true art is to bind the material of the body to the essential and immaterial matter of the spirit, to match the outer life to the inner, to make with the hand what only the inward senses can grasp. And the transparent, intangible, incarnadine blush of aesthetic bliss — which, for those with the necessary inflection of personal nature to know it, travels through the veins and filaments of the spirit with something like a religious ardor, something like an aimless and drifting moment of love — is always triggered by some artist making some aspect of the inner life somehow incarnate, by some artist breaking the laws of physics and fate, breaking the laws of the physics of the soul and merging across the chasm that splits our essence the facts of material existence and the energy of inspired life, to bring to the inertness of the mass that we are the brilliant swiftness of the thought that we are as well — the true meaning of achieving meaning, the reason it is precious, the purpose of knowing, of thinking, which ultimately is to feel — to achieve the experience of being fully alive.

At the heart of Gunderson’s unique artistic spirit is a technical innovation, a redefinition of painting that is entirely her own — the route by which, under her hand, the creativity of art itself has been re-created, as it must be, always, by any true artist. Gunderson’s innovation involves the painting of figurative works executed completely

in black paint. The artist has been developing her technique for the black paintings since the late 1980s. She employs a variety of black hues to obtain a range of differing values, of distinguishing darkensses — ranging from the soft and subtle, almost succulent suffusion of lamp black to the midnight absence and light-absorbing eclipse of peach black. Yet, their differences of value do not account for the visual evidence of the figures, for the sheer fact that — painted in black set against backgrounds of virtually identical black — they are clear to the eye, as clearly visible as if they had been illustrated with a full palette.

Rather than illuminate her subject matter through the use of a full spectrum of hues, Gunderson engraves her imagery in the air between the painted surface and the viewer. Rather than simulate the effects of light in full-color images whose tones are orchestrated to denote a shade of vicarious illumination striking a vicarious scene, she instead choreographs the projection of actual light off her monochrome works and focuses it, molds it into an image that coalesces in real space, not in the space that appears to recede behind the painting's surface, but in the literal space immediately before the viewer's eyes.

Having chosen black as the color that most effectively offsets the projection of pure white light, that most effectively clarifies the highlighted sheen of the painted veneer, Gunderson works as much like an engraver as a painter. She scores the black field of the painting using only her brush, covering it with patterns of lightly incised lines that determine the planes and surfaces of the image by their direction and apparent movement, by the way they reflect the light that strikes them. In essence, Gunderson directs the reflection of light, controlling the physics of illumination and transforming the painting's shimmer of glistening black into a visual ballet, creating the image out of pure light, carving the image out of the vibrations of pure illumination as if out of a vibrant block of living stone, as if out of the very substance of actuality itself, the raw material of the materially, and the immaterially, real.

For all the similarity of technique, the effect is entirely different from that of engraving. The engraver's line works upon the white of the paper; Gunderson's scoring of black paint opens only onto more black. The white one sees is of the light itself. The image arises from a background that seems to have the richness and density of black satin, a mysterious space of velvet texture. The image literally glows, lives as a white iridescence, and hovers in the atmosphere, existing literally as the brightness that falls from the air, as the inner illumination brought into the matter of the earth.

It can be argued that what Gunderson has done is to move the vanishing point — moving it so extremely, she has shifted it out of the painting. In normal perspective composition, the vanishing point is placed only seemingly in the volumetric, only apparently deep in the background — in fact, the vanishing point is positioned on the surface of the work, and all compositional lines are laid to point to it, to intersect where it lies, resulting in the visual conviction that space and all apparent objects in apparent space are receding. Instead, Gunderson's technique has the lines of reflected light intersect at a point in the air between the painting and the viewer — or rather, at a sweeping continuum of points, each one determined by where the viewer stands, and at each point, the image forms itself. Put differently, she has substituted a focal point for the vanishing point.

The effect of this technique — of “aiming” the intended image at the focal point of the reflected light, of positioning it in the air between the viewer and the surface of the work — the quality of the visual impression made on the viewer, is as different from that of the normally painted image as is her rendering technique itself from that of normative painting. Rather than accomplishing a flat visual display that simulates the appearance of a three-dimensional scene observed in realistic, volumetric space, Gunderson achieves an image that seems to function as fully three-dimensional, draped in the substancelessness of space, carved into the very air, and sculpted out of the light. It is rendered, for all intents and purposes, holographically. The image alters as you move around it, as you move around where you feel certain it exists. As one crosses back and forth before one of her paintings, or moves up and down, intensities of light



Churning Grace - Out to Sea, 2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches



The Baltic Revisited, 2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches



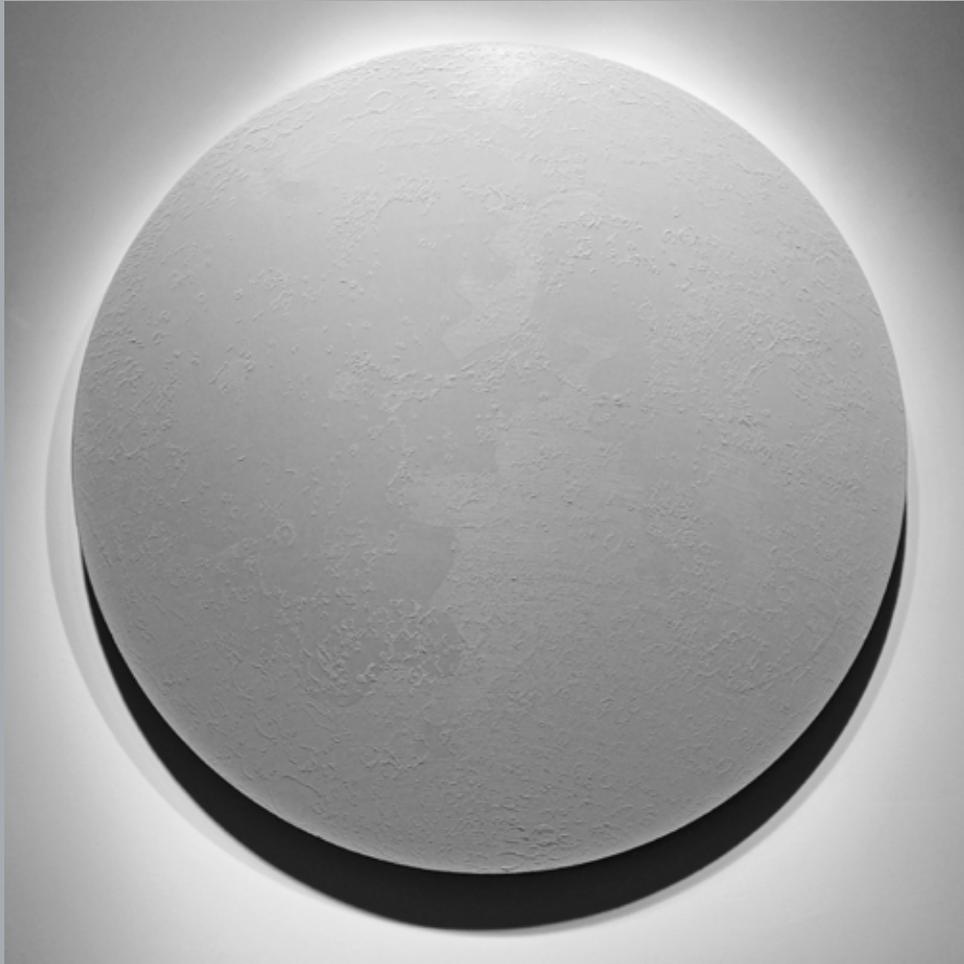
Bridge Into the Night, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches



Murphy's Moon, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches

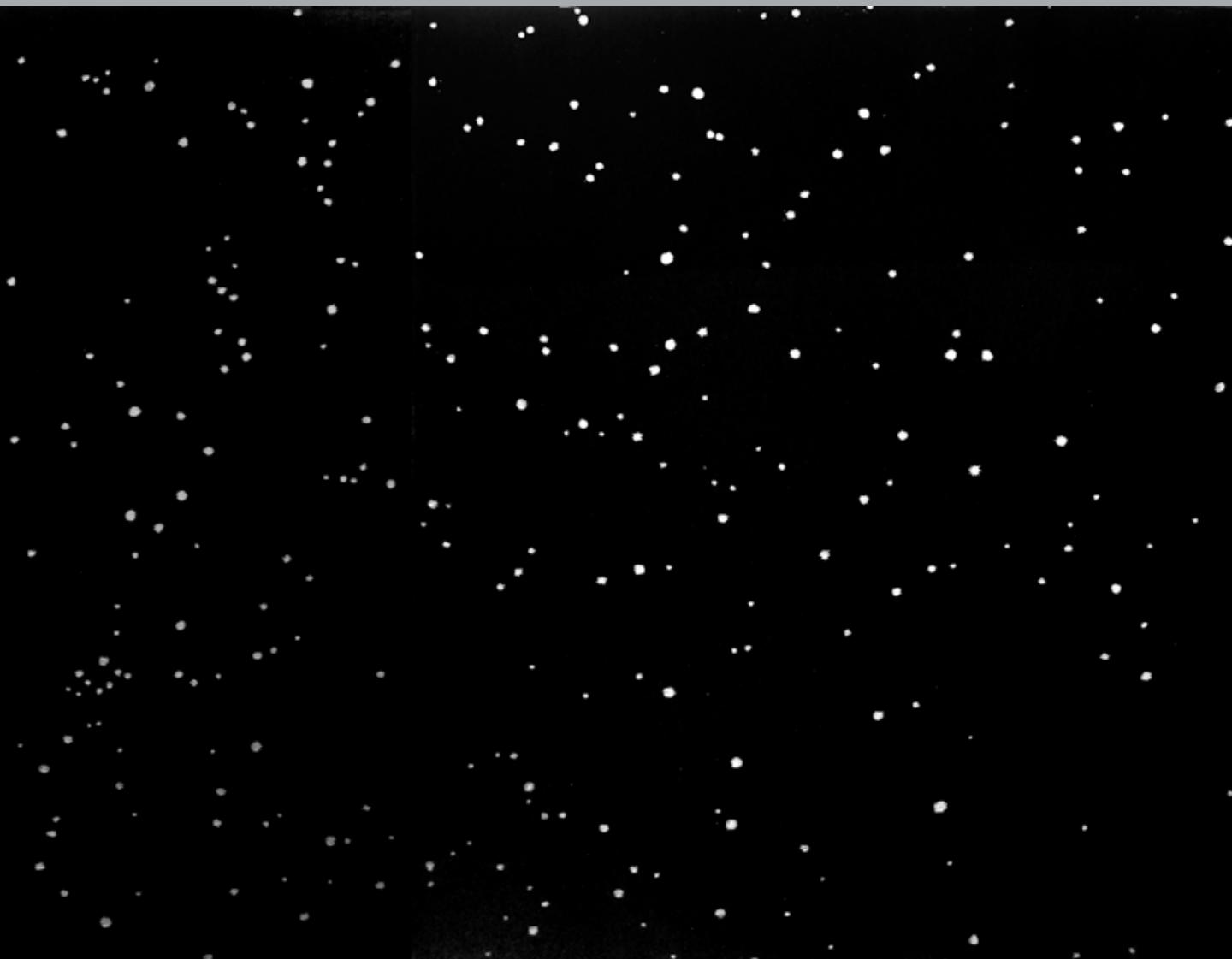


Black Moon, 2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter



White Moon, 2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter

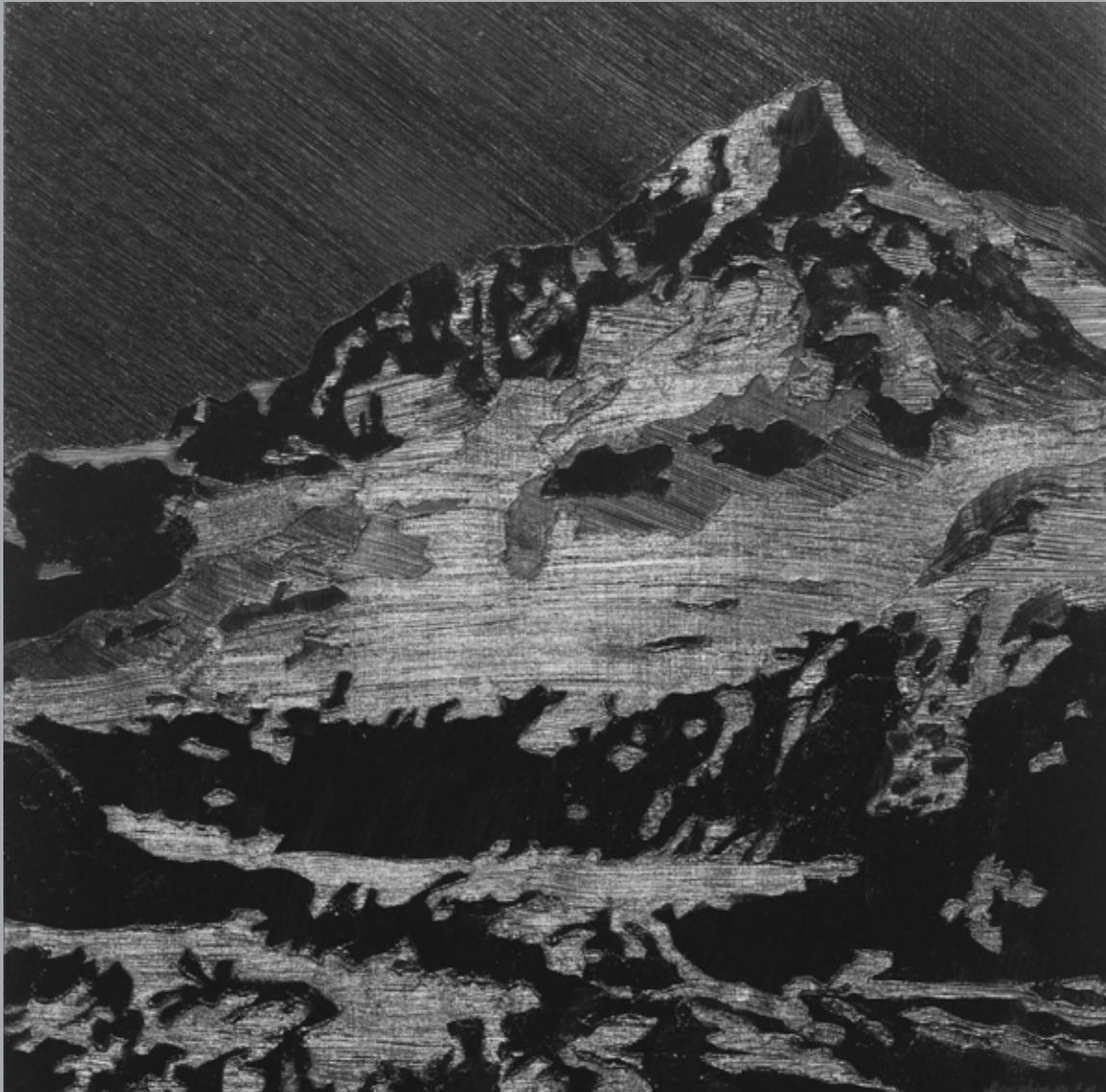




Apophis - Near Miss, 2009, triptych , oil on linen, 61 1/2 x 156 3/4 inches



Small White Matterhorn, 2011, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches



Small Black Medial-Moraine, 2011, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches



The Baltic Revisited
2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches



Churning Grace - Out to Sea
2010, oil on linen, 73 x 73 inches

change — what was dim becomes brilliantly lit, what hotly glowed begins to fall into shadow. Continue moving and relationships between foreground and background start to shift, elements appear to rotate, contours rise and fall, the image in its entirety starts to change its position.

Gunderson's concentration in this exhibition on waterscapes and celestial images is in certain ways the most appropriate application of her visual manner, and one can see the nearly holographic effect in her work perhaps nowhere so forcefully and effectively as in the two purely water paintings here: *The Baltic Revisited*, 2011, and *Churning Grace Out to Sea*, 2010. There is something mountainous and rugged about them both, something craggy and angry, and something in-turned — self-contained, meditative, independent, majestic, and royal. At the same time, there is something of them that is of the very essence of what they depict, something that rolls, shifts, and crashes like an ocean, that pours layer upon layer like waves, that slides together and through, like liquid masses penetrating each other, always becoming each other. The two images are distinct, a careful eye cannot mistake one for the other — the *Baltic* is choppy and more active, more facile and possessing greater fluidity; the *Churning Grace* is more viscous, has greater depth to its troughs, encroaches more slowly. And yet, they are also the same, as if there beneath the waves of the ostensible subject, there were another subject, as if both images were equally of the essence of something they share, something they are both images of, particular instances of.

As one moves around these works, the light that reflects from the painting and composes the rolling waves begins to roll like waves. The waves rise, pour back from the direction you step into, and crash down upon the surface they attempted to depart, as others rise up in shock and dismay, mounting behind them. Everything rides laterally, like sand across the desert of the sea. And one can detect that each wave, each individual gesture committed in paint to the field of the work, each configuration in the general expanse, is a single



Bridge Into the Night
2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches

gesture by the artist — each wave is a coherent and continuous movement of Gunderson's hand. And one senses the movement within the movement, the human articulation within the human conception — the tangible human presence in the thought that is the meaning of the painting, the intention to commit this painting, and this painting style, and language, and no other.

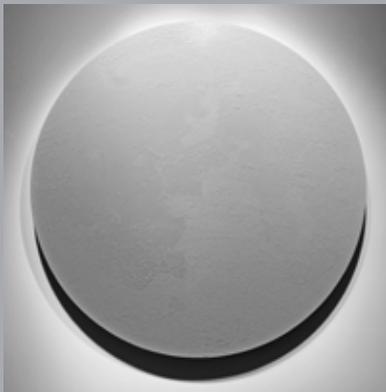
The waves on the surface of the seas are a particularly apt subject for Gunderson's technique, for they are suggestive of the wave nature of the true medium she manipulates — light. Yet, her technique is equally adept at rendering with conviction, and in the void of the space before the painting, the appearance of fixed material

objects. One can see the combined effect in *Bridge Into the Night*, 2010. The painting portrays the bridge that connects Bahrain with Saudi Arabia. (The painting was created for an exhibition that Gunderson mounted in Bahrain in 2010.) The solidity and stability of the bridge are as evident and tangibly present as are the movements of the water beneath it, movements that become almost tactilely real in the dance of light as one circles the painting — the dance that relays structure as well as fluidity.

The conviction of material substance arising out of the play of pure white light points to another effect of Gunderson's technical innovation, a further and extraordinary implication. As one moves before the painted surfaces and the images shift and transform themselves — like a sculpture, or a hologram carved in laser light — one begins to sense tactile qualities of the image; one begins to feel the image with the fingertip of the eye. This is what Gunderson calls "the haptic" — a scientific term for the quality of touch. With this effect, she achieves the synaesthetic bridge — the point at which one caliber of sensory stimulation transforms into another, the point at which vision creates



Black Moon
2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter



White Moon
2011, oil on panel, 36 inch diameter

the impression of tangibility, as if you were literally reaching out and grasping the image with your hand. It is a rare and extraordinary achievement, for synaesthesia — the transformation of one sense into another — was an artistic effect sought by many of the artists, as well as the writers, of the early days of Modernism. It engages all the senses together, moving the viewer into a state of altered sensation, and to a heightened degree it infuses the materials out of which art is made with the spirit of aesthetic perception, with the awareness of having been transported to a place beyond the ordinary experiences of life, with the feeling of the more lilting existence.

This integration of the sensations, this capability to feel the sculptural qualities of Gunderson's configurations of the intangible of pure light, can be felt in the movements of the waves, that palpably churn and collide, advance, hesitate, and retreat, crash, conference, and ruminate in her sea paintings. It can be felt hard and architectural in the streaking ramp and path of lamps of her bridge to Saudi Arabia. However, nowhere in the entire body of her work can it be sensed so well, so powerfully and with such authority, as in her moon paintings: *Black Moon*, 2011, *White Moon*, 2011, and the remarkable *Murphy's Moon*, 2010.

Just as waves are a particularly apt image for Gunderson's technique, so too is the moon — our iconic image for the very idea of reflected light, which is Gunderson's true medium. These works, and *Murphy's Moon* most especially, are also exceptionally potent demonstrations that Gunderson's art is more an evocation of a visually tactile awareness of configurations of light than it is, for all its apparent orientation on the figurative, a visually descriptive presentation of objective figures. This is to say that Gunderson's art is about the unbroken and undivided field of continuously shifting orchestrations of radiance — that it is a formulation of all-over painting. Of course, it can be said that any painting is a demonstration of all-over painting, that any painting is painted throughout its surface and that the representation of individual objects is only an effect of the allocation of a continuous spread of shifting pigment. But it is the very elements of painting that Gunder-

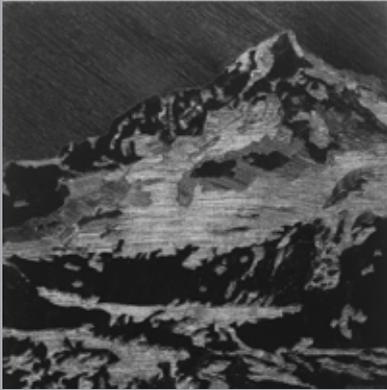


Murphy's Moon
2010, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches

son has excised from her work — in particular, the use of color — that serves to define clearly outlined objects in nominal painting. In the normal mode, the edges of “things” are as distinct a set of particulars as are any other aspects of the depiction.

The quality of depiction is approached differently in Gunderson’s work. Examine the surface of *Murphy’s Moon* closely and see the degree to which the complex detailing of the surface is not precisely depictive, not precisely a representation, or duplication, of the appearance of the moon. The finely wrought detail — as finely executed as anything in Gunderson’s oeuvre — is arranged to control density of impression, lightness

and dark, the angles of the sheen. This is not the duplication of the physical object but the engine for creating a visually congealed and dense impression of the presence of the object in the power of the light that is sent out from the work — and not just the object but the apparent object within a field of dense impression, in this case against the backdrop of a dark space that is as deeply and extensively incised by Gunderson’s brush, that is as visually active, as the apparent moon. Examine the painting with increasing care and it becomes increasingly difficult to locate the precise edge of the apparent object, of the hovering moon. The field of the work is unified and indivisible in a sense that a fully hued painting is not, and the arrangement of paint is devoted not to depiction so much as to the maneuvering of the illumination, the carving and modeling of it, the building of the iridescence, the scattering of the glister, the cratering of the light.



Small Black Medial-Moraine
2011, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

(One can see the effect all the more clearly when comparing either of Gunderson's black moon paintings with her painting *White Moon*, or comparing *Small White Matterhorn*, 2011, with *Small Black Medial-Moraine*, 2011. These pairings provide the unusual opportunity to see the mechanics of the black-on-black work through comparison with a similar composition, or in the case of the moons an identical composition, done entirely in white. Gunderson's white paintings are similar in technique — as with the black paintings, what appears to be a single color is in fact a small variety of hues, primarily silver white and titanium white, yet the effect is entirely different. Here, the definition of the vista is composed of what appear as shadows rather than highlights. Here, the image seems to recede into the surface of the painting, much like the depiction in a realistic perspective painting appears to do, rather than rise out of the painted surface as do Gunderson's black paintings.)



Small White Matterhorn
2011, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

Gunderson's black paintings are more field oriented, far less clearly composed as figure/ground — even though they clearly convey an image/ground impression and with greater immediacy, with greater density and tactility, than does ordinary painting. Even so, they are more lateral, more a continuously changing configuration of carefully composed reflective shimmering.

What Gunderson is practicing in her black paintings — through the orientation on continuously shifting configurations of medium rather than the compounding of representations of individual objects — is the artistic equivalent of field theory in science: of reality as not made up of individual objects, rather as a continuous field in which apparent objects are really configurations that only appear individual but are not, comparable to, well, the waves in the water. In other, vastly over-simplified words, space is not empty, and there is nothing but “space” and its contortions, its waves.

What would be an object under the hand of any other artist — the moon is the primary example in these works — is something more like a field within a field in Gunderson's work. The moon appears here less like a hard object and more like a

closed field turned in upon itself, a field of positive curvature, made finite and local, set within the more extensive field of black space but still itself an energy field, still something vibrant and seeming to lift off its own apparent surface, seeming to radiate — something dynamic.

And this is to say that there is something of abstract thinking in these works, something like the abstraction of a scientific theory, which is what abstraction in art always should have meant, and in the best work always did mean, for there is not so wide a split in the divisions among the many forms of the most serious-minded thought. In theoretical abstract thinking, the point of abstraction is to move away from the specific details of individual instances and find a form that represents many examples of similar events in reality — to find the thread that runs through many things, despite their inevitable surface differences, and to find ultimately, if such an ultimate is achievable, the thread that is shared by everything. It is fair to say that abstract thinking is a form of essentialism — the attempt to stipulate what is of the essence of the ever changing real.

And this is what abstract painting was always to be — a move away from surface appearances and an attempt to render that which is more essential, that which the surface appearances only point to, a move to get behind the veneer. It would be a serious mistake to say that Gunderson cannot be considered, in any sense, an abstract painter because she comes so close, relatively, to rendering the appearances of observable objects. That is beside the point. Gunderson is getting at the very essence of the observable forms — her waves are the very idea of waves, they are what waves are when purified, in the mind, of superfluous detail — they not only appear to be waves, they move like waves, they shine like the rocking of the midnight ocean. Her moon is not just the look of the celestial object; it seems to condense with the massiveness of coagulated light, it seems to be creating itself out of its own aura. These works are thoroughly realistic, for they portray the dynamics by which the appearances of the real become what they are. What they are not is representational, for they do not merely attempt to duplicate the fixed objects as observed. In short, they are appearances idealized, and thus made pure. Realism but not representation is not a bad formula for the abstract.

Even so, it would be a mistake to characterize Gunderson's art as lying at an extreme along a spectrum. It is truer to say that, just as her images hover in the air between the painting and the viewer, her art hovers somewhere between abstraction and representation. Her works are somewhere, one might say, between ideograms and pictographs, somewhere between what can be recognized by its surface (literal) fidelity to something observable in the world, and what bears a more intellectual (less literal-minded) fidelity or similarity to the observably real. In obvious ways, they resemble the real as a photograph does — her bridge is specifically and recognizably the bridge between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, her moon is undeniably our moon. In other, less obvious ways, they resemble the real as an equation does. But resemble it they do, with great fidelity, if not to appearances in every possible sense, then to a truth in the appearances.

As we have seen at other times, serious work in any field resembles serious work in other fields, as the split in the thought of the time becomes healed by the effort to be meaningful, to be enough of an individual in vision and practice to mean anything. What we also see in Gunderson's art is what we often see in the work of the strongest artists, and "strong" is a far greater compliment than "great," which has never had any meaning. We see the beginnings of the healing of the split not just in thought, but in the mind — the mind of the individual, the mind that the individual is.

We see it in what must be considered the showpiece work of the exhibition, *Apophis Near Miss, 2009*. The work is an enormous panorama of a night sky, measuring over five feet tall and more than 13 feet across. The black background has been worked in brush strokes that reach from the top to the bottom of the panel, to be, as Gunderson has said, inclusive of the viewer — enormous gestures of the hand that encapsulate the eye that is compelled to respond to the reach of their sheen. The knots in the field shimmer like stars, to portray what are intended to be a recognizable distribution of constellations and apparent star clusters. In fact, the vista is the night sky as seen from a specific spot in southern Russia. The

spot is the place at which, on the night of April 13, 2036, the asteroid Apophis will make its closest approach to earth. When discovered in 2004, Apophis was thought to be on an eventual collision course with earth. In the time since, the chances of a direct impact have been determined to be small. The asteroid will approach earth again in 2012 and 2029, and 2036 will be the closest near miss.

If Apophis does strike the planet, it is thought the impact will be approximately 10 times the size of the largest hydrogen bomb ever exploded.

Gunderson has characterized this work as one of “terror and relief.” To the eye alone, it is a vast rendition of Pascal’s most horrifying thought: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.” Encountering the painting with its title, one waits for the destruction to come hurtling out of the darkness, and yet one also knows that, this time, it will not. And in the language of Gunderson’s art, we know that the viewer — whose position for receiving the reflected light from the work makes the focusing of the image possible at all — is intact because the image exists. The light condenses an image because it is being observed — if the image exists, the observer exists, and destruction has not arrived.



Apophis - Near Miss, 2009, triptych , oil on linen, 61 1/2 x 156 3/4 inches

Terror plus relief — it is the Aristotelian formula for tragedy: terror and catharsis. This is the integration of the opposites, not just of logical progression, but of thought at its depths, thought

that is human nature, according to one of the most august formulas for one of the high-

est art forms. This is the integration of the personality, of the imagining mind, its split healed, its opposing forces balanced and resolved, the foundation of meaning made whole.

For only through being capable of meaning something, something specific and precise, something deliberate and fully, knowingly intended, can one have a meaning oneself. Only by being an individual can one have a voice that is unborrowed, and a purpose, a voice, and a spirit, unlent. To meaningfully be at all, one must be oneself alone, with a purpose and manner of putting it to practice that is unlike that of anyone else. One can no more adopt someone else's language of thought and dreaming than one can acquire another's fingerprint, another's identity.

That is the highest achievement we discover in art, and in all forms of high-temperature endeavor, and we find it in the art of Karen Gunderson: the fashioning of the individual identity, the creation of the individual human soul. We have been taught that we are all endowed with the capacity to achieve an individual soul, but it is ours to accomplish it, for it comes in no other way. Each of us must achieve it through becoming that which no one else can become, for the soul is that which is unduplicable, which cannot be copied, which has no identicals. It is something learned but unlent, and it has a unique meaning, and a discrete voice.

This is what we see rising up in the art of Karen Gunderson — the essence not just of the subject of her thought, but of the human, for the human is always the subject of art. It is so not because the story must always be about us — no subject is foreign to the human mind — but because the human is present not as the object of thought but as the origin of thinking, not as the thing depicted but as the voice that speaks the words, the ear that composes the song, the hand that holds the brush. The human is our precondition for any vision arising, and is the soil for, the foundation of, the more lilting experience. And the human rises up in every work by Karen Gunderson, lifting up out of the darkness, to hover in the space before us, to float before our very eyes, breaking like a dawn, like clear light.



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

An Intimate Unity

Fulya Peker's *The Plague*

An Intimate

Fulya Peker's *The*

Unity

Plague

by Nicholas Birns

Hyperion 2

Written and Directed by Fulya Peker

September 16 – 25, 2011

Theater for the New City (Cino Theater), NYC

When I attended the opening performance of Fulya Peker's *Plague* on September 16, the theater opened slightly late; finally, the announcement was made that we were free to go in. To do so, one had to step over a prone figure on the ground, a bald man caked in mud, a kind of combination of hobo and primordial Adam. This not only burst the bounds of the proscenium but also indicated the way this performance would present not just a spectacle but an anthropology. Instead of merely watching humans 'act,' we were to be confronted anew with speculations on the very nature of humanity. The actor eventually entered the stage and assumed a contemplative pose, now seeming more Bodhisattva than bum.

As I ascended the stairs to my chosen, slightly peripherally located seat, I stepped over what I thought was a bulky brown rug spreading out from the stage to the audience stalls. I stepped over it rather authoritatively, in a way that if I had missed a step would have clamped down on the 'rug' rather hard. After a point, I realized that in fact the bulkiness of the rug was caused by there being a human being inside it! I had almost crushed one of the actors! Again, more important than the standard Brechtian alienation effect is the total lack of distinction between the substance of the piece and its articulation. This might seem too comfortably organic were it not for the overriding metaphor of the plague. The very phrase "communicable disease" suggests how plagues can carry information that is also destruction, that their ability to penetrate past barriers means that the sort of structural interchangeability betoken here is not just a lark or a passport to beatific infinitude.

The action of the piece took place against the background of a central raised panel covered by a fluted black curtain. In the back of it to the right was a series of small white river rocks strewn on the ground. The elemental colors of black and white provided a stark tableau; they provided, though, less a foundation for the work than a grammar of it, in the same way that the precise and immediate verbal relationships of the vowels and consonants in the words were mirrored by the gestures of the actors. A robed figure in black (assuming a white robe by the end of the play) stood in the middle, speaking most of the language of the play and speaking as its *raisonneur*. He was flanked

most impressively by two black-clothed caryatid-like figures who maintained an architectural poise for nearly an hour. In back, a rustling, implication-filled tympani is heard as, from stage center left, a relentless pilot light bores into the audience, signifying, perhaps, the dualities, the ambiguities, of enlightenment.

One of the astonishing aspects of *The Plague* was how elastic the four male actors managed to make their bodies, seeming stoic at times, invulnerable at others, sometimes seeming very virile, sometimes more gender-indeterminate, sometimes vigorously tall, sometimes prone on the ground. They could seem Neanderthals at one moment; robots the next; living, breathing contemporaries at another instance. Again, the sense of the anthropological seen at the very beginning returned, as body and utterance were both being examined for a kind of bedrock, core humanity, about which yet no crippling essentialist assumptions were being made. The sense of body as, again, not just base about mediation fortified the sense of permeation that the piece's ruling metaphors, plague and the verbal interstices of languages, very much paraded.

Using very simple words—including many monosyllables—constrained by the need to have rhyme and assonance in as much of the enunciated language as possible, *The Plague* nonetheless makes a concerted historiographic argument. Most take it is a mere coincidence that the Black Death occurred near the end of the Middle Ages as commonly conceived, that, e.g., the quintessentially medieval Dante wrote before it, the quintessentially Renaissance Boccaccio wrote largely after it (and, famously of it). Peker argues here that the plague never totally ended, that its external aspects came to an end but not its internal. (This of course is relevant to the nature of event in general; how can one observe the anniversary of 9/11 if the events of 9/11 have in some way not stopped happening?) Even after the physical disease had vanished, the plague of reason remained, internalized, manifested in Cartesian dualism and in the reign of unthinking rationality. “The most terrible plague is one that does not reveal its symptoms.” Modernity has been trapped by a plague endemic to its very conception. Of course, Peker is saying no more than many modern critics of modernity such as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Adorno, but to dramatize it so intricately, so implicitly, and so *considering the nature of her argument* non-argumentatively is not only a considerable feat but a moving one. Peker's thesis could be potentially stentorian or monolithic, but her dramatic rendition of it forestalls these declensions; having established a past (the literal plague) and a present (a metaphorical plague of reason), Peker then looks to the future. One of the great assets of Peker's work is that it utterly lacks the curdled irony, cloying self-awareness, and naïve cynicism so often found in contemporary New York performance. Jettisoning the post-collegiate smugness of much of the predominant consensus, Peker is after a more serious art and is not afraid to flaunt artistic determination that, in its

dignity and fierce ardor, will cause envy and resentment in the cynical. (In this light, the setting in the Theater for the New City reminded me of the work of the late Jeanette Arnone-K, whose paintings and murals, often exhibited there, in their bravest moments challenged an otherwise regnant bourgeois consensus in the urgency with which they registered ecological peril). Peker points out the sterility of reason, how what we think has been deliverance is in fact disease, what we think salvific is in fact morbid. Yet Peker is not writing from a sense of medievalist lament, a Henry Adams-like sense that the Virgin was superior to the Dynamo; she also avoids any kind of hortatory suggestion of a revolution in life, whether through political or sexual revitalization—vulgar-Marxist, vulgar-Freudian, and vulgar-Nietzsche. Her high seriousness and her use of innovative techniques to render issues of artistic gravity hearken back to modernism, but Peker is too postmodern to proffer any kind of positive agenda. Or is she not? It struck me towards the end that *The Plague was* proposing a solution, and that was through its own medium—of theatricality, and, more important, of language.

Peker has worked a lot with Richard Foreman of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, and the enigmatic lyricism of *The Plague was* reminiscent of Foreman, as was the rigor and discipline to which the actors had so creatively submitted themselves. Foreman, at least in his work of the past 20 years, seems to want to deliberately foil any pattern in his plays, particularly any overall import to the utterances and ejaculations made by the actors in the course of their performances. Peker, on the other hand, renders a kind of tone poem, playing on inherent resemblances in language like that between “once” and “was,” on the (to use a word sounded in the piece) “tectonic” possibilities of language. Yet the sword is double-edged. The play’s text uses rhyme, yet the introduction of rhyme into European languages was, the play hints, part of our falling into verbal imprisonment. The play celebrates the resources of language in its own right, “words alone” as Yeats famously put it. And yet language is “the problem,” verbs wriggling free from their moorings in nouns create sterile puzzlement; the same elemental language whose bare resources are so pleasing in their enunciation here also holds us in thrall. Peker, originally from Turkey, is not a native speaker of English, and this pertains to *The Plague* both because it makes her experiments with language not just playful but philological, in the manner of an Auerbach or a Spitzer (who famously went the other way with respect to Turkey), or ascetic, in the manner of a Beckett, and because not being a native speaker robs Peker of a base that for a native speaker might make such an elemental iteration a safe harbor, a reassurance. Peker can seek or find no reassurance in the fundamentals; rather, for her, they illuminate the hope and peril of the very condition of our understanding.

In the program notes, Peker adduced high-modernist precursors such as Artaud and Grotowski, and, again, it is refreshing, considering the narcissistic

snickering that so often assumes the stage in New York today, that these great artists are being taken seriously. Yet, watching *The Plague*, I thought less of these European precursors than Ralph Waldo Emerson—the Emerson who said, in “Nature,”

“

Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. A rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. For, it pervades Thought also. Every universal truth that we express in words implies or supposes every other truth.

Peker, in linking the articulation of language and the movement of performers so intimately, in sounding the innards of a tongue she also thinks holds us in chains, is faithful to the intricacy and brutal duality of Emerson’s conception. As I exited the theater—unobstructed this time by prone bodies or human rugs—I felt a pervasive sense of possibility and excitement. This was not because I had been temporarily infused with sophomoric naïveté. As Peker and Emerson instruct us, all our truths and pains are intimately bound, and we can only hope to think outside of them if we understand how thoroughly and delicately we are sutured. Peker’s elegant, forceful, and stunning play offers, in its stark, austere tableau, a glimpse of how this might be attempted.

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SATANTANGO

*Translated from the Hungarian
by George Szirtes*



A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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SATANTANGO

In that case, I'll miss the thing by waiting for it. —FK

The First Part

New S Of Their cO miNG

One morning near the end of October not long before the first drops of the mercilessly long autumn rains began to fall on the cracked and saline soil on the western side of the estate (later the stinking yellow sea of mud would render footpaths impassable and put the town too beyond reach) Futaki woke to hear bells. The closest possible source was a lonely chapel about four kilometers southwest on the old Hochmeiss estate but not only did that have no bell but the tower had collapsed during the war and at that distance it was too far to hear anything. And in any case they did not sound distant to him, these ringing-booming bells; their triumphal clangor was swept along by the wind and seemed to come from somewhere close by (“It’s as if they were coming from the mill . . .”). He propped himself on his elbows on the pillow so as to look out of the mousehole-sized kitchen window that was partly misted up, and directed his gaze to the faint blue dawn sky but the field was still and silent, bathed only in the now ever fainter bell sound, and the only light to be seen was the one glimmering in the doctor’s window whose house was set well apart from the others on the far side, and that was only because its occupant had for years been unable to sleep in the dark. Futaki held his breath because he wanted to know where the noise came from: he couldn’t afford to lose a single

stray note of the rapidly fading clangor, however remote (“You must be asleep, Futaki . . .”). Despite his lameness he was well known for his light tread and he hobbled across the ice-cold stone floor of the kitchen soundless as a cat, opened the windows and leaned out (“Is no one awake? Can’t people hear it? Is there nobody else around?”). A sharp damp gust hit him straight in the face so he had to close his eyes for a moment and, apart from the cockcrow, a distant bark, and the fierce howling of the wind that had sprung up just a few minutes earlier, there was nothing to hear however hard he listened but the dull beating of his own heart, as if the whole thing had been merely a kind of game or ghostly half-dream (“. . . It’s as if somebody out there wants to scare me”). He gazed sadly at the threatening sky, at the burned-out remnants of a locust-plagued summer, and suddenly saw on the twig of an acacia, as in a vision, the progress of spring, summer, fall and winter, as if the whole of time were a frivolous interlude in the much greater spaces of eternity, a brilliant conjuring trick to produce something apparently orderly out of chaos, to establish a vantage point from which chance might begin to look like necessity . . . and he saw himself nailed to the cross of his own cradle and coffin, painfully trying to tear his body away, only, eventually, to deliver himself—utterly naked, without identifying mark, stripped down to essentials—into the care of the people whose duty it was to wash the corpses, people obeying an order snapped out in the dry air against a background loud with torturers and flayers of skin, where he was obliged to regard the human condition without a trace of pity, without a single possibility of any way back to life, because by then he would know for certain that all his life he had been playing with cheaters who had marked the cards and who would, in the end, strip him even of his last means of defense, of that hope of someday finding his way back home. He turned his head toward the east, once the home of a thriving industry, now nothing but a set of dilapidated and deserted buildings, watching while the first rays of a

swollen red sun broke through the topmost beams of a derelict farmhouse from which the roof tiles had been stripped. "I really should come to a decision. I can't stay here any longer." He snuck back under the warm duvet again and rested his head on his arm, but could not close his eyes; at first it had been the ghostly bells that had frightened him but now it was the threatening silence that followed: anything might happen now, he felt. But he did not move a muscle, not until the objects around him, that had so far been merely listening, started up a nervous conversation (the sideboard gave a creak, a saucepan rattled, a china plate slid back into the rack) at which point he turned away from the sour smell of the perspiring Mrs. Schmidt, felt with his hand for the glass of water left standing by the bed and drained it at one gulp. Having done so he was free of his childish terror: he sighed, wiped his sweating brow and, knowing that Schmidt and Kráner were only just now rounding up the cattle to drive them west from the Szikes toward the farm byres in the west where they would eventually receive eight months' worth of hard-earned wages, and that this would take a good couple of hours, he decided to try and get a bit more sleep. He closed his eyes, turned on his side, put his arm around the woman and had almost succeeded in nodding off when he heard the bells again. "For God's sake!" He pushed aside the duvet but the moment his naked calloused feet touched the stone floor the bells suddenly stopped ("As if someone had given a signal . . .") . . . He sat hunched on the edge of the bed his hands clasped in his lap till the empty glass caught his attention. His throat was dry, his right leg was suffering shooting pains, and now he didn't dare to either get up or go back under the covers. "I am leaving by tomorrow at the very latest." He surveyed the vaguely functioning articles in the bare kitchen, from the cooking range filthy with burned fat and leftover scraps to the basket without a handle under the bed, the rickety table, the dusty icons hanging on the wall, and the saucepans, his eye finally resting on the tiny window and the bare

branches of the acacia bending across the Halicses' house with its dented roof and teetering chimney, the smoke billowing from it, and said, "I'll take what's mine and go tonight! ... No later than tomorrow at any rate. Tomorrow morning." "Dear God!" Mrs. Schmidt cried, waking suddenly, and stared about her in the dusk, terrified, her chest heaving, but when she saw that everything looked back at her with a familiar expression she gave a relieved sigh and slumped back on the pillow. "What's the matter? Bad dreams?" Futaki asked her. Mrs. Schmidt was staring at the ceiling in fright. "Good Lord, really horrible dreams!" She sighed again and put her hand on her heart. "Such things! Me?! ... Who'd have imagined? ... There I was sitting in the room and ... suddenly there was a knock at the window. I didn't dare to open it, just stood there, peeking through the curtains. I only saw his back because by now he was shaking the door handle, and then his mouth as he bellowed. God knows what he was saying. He was unshaven and it seemed his eyes were made of glass ... it was horrible ... Then I remembered I had only given the key one turn the previous night and knew that by the time I got there it would be too late so I quickly slammed the kitchen door, but then I realized I didn't have the key. I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat. Then I don't exactly recall why or how but suddenly Mrs. Halics was at the window making faces—you know what it's like when she makes faces—and anyway, there she was staring into the kitchen and then, I don't know how, she vanished, though by that time the man outside was kicking at the door and would have been through it in a minute, and I thought of the bread knife and dashed over to the cupboard but the drawer was jammed and I kept trying to open it ... I thought I would die of terror ... Then I heard him smash the door open and he was coming down the hall. I still couldn't open the drawer. Suddenly he was there at the kitchen door just as I finally succeeded in opening the drawer to grab the knife, and he was getting closer waving his arms about ... but I

don't know . . . suddenly he was lying on the floor in the corner by the window and, yes, he had a lot of red and blue saucepans with him that started flying about the kitchen . . . and I felt the floor move under me and, just imagine, the whole kitchen set off, like a car . . . and I can't remember anything after that . . ." she ended and laughed in relief. "We're a fine pair," Futaki shook his head. "I woke—to what do you think?—to someone ringing bells . . ." "What!" the woman stared at him in astonishment: "Someone was ringing bells? Where?" "I don't understand it either. In fact not once but twice, one after the other . . ." It was Mrs. Schmidt's turn to shake her head. "You—you'll go crazy." "Or I might have dreamed it all," grumbled Futaki nervously: "Mark my words, something is going to happen today." The woman turned to him angrily. "You're always saying that, just shut up, can't you?" Suddenly they heard the gate creaking open at the back and stared each other in fright. "It must be him," whispered Mrs. Schmidt. "I can feel it." Futaki sat up in shock. "But that's impossible! How could he have got back so soon . . ." "How should I know . . . ! Go! Go now!" He leapt out of bed, grabbed his clothes, stuck them under his arm, shut the door behind him, and dressed. "My stick. I left my stick out there!" The Schmidts hadn't used the room since spring. Green mildew covered the cracked and peeling walls, but the clothes in the cupboard, a cupboard that was regularly cleaned, were also mildewed, as were the towels and all the bedding, and a couple of weeks was all it took for the cutlery saved in the drawer for special occasions to develop a coating of rust, and what with the legs of the big lace-covered table having worked loose, the curtains having yellowed and the lightbulb having gone out, they decided one day to move into the kitchen and stay there, and since there was nothing they could do to stop it happening anyway, they left the room to be colonized by spiders and mice. He leaned against the doorjamb and wondered how he might get out without being seen. The situation seemed pretty hopeless because he would have

to pass through the kitchen and he felt too decrepit to clamber through the window where he would, in any case, be observed by Mrs. Kráner or Mrs. Halics who spent half their lives peeking through their curtains to keep an eye on affairs outside. Besides which, his stick, if Schmidt should discover it, would immediately betray the fact that he was hiding somewhere in the house, and if that happened he might not receive his share at all since he knew Schmidt did not consider such a thing a joking matter; that he would promptly be run off the estate to which he had rushed seven years before in response to news of its success—two years after the estate had been set up—at a time when he was hungry and had only a single pair of ragged trousers plus a faded overcoat with empty pockets to stand up in. Mrs. Schmidt ran into the hall while he put his ear to the door. “No complaining, sweetheart!” he heard Schmidt’s hoarse voice: “You do as I tell you. Is that clear?” Futaki felt a hot rush of blood. “My money!” He felt trapped. But he had no time to think so decided to climb out of the window after all because “something has to be done right away.” He was about to open the window catch when he heard Schmidt moving down the hall. “He’s going to take a leak!” He tiptoed back to the door and held his breath to listen. Once he heard Schmidt close the door to the backyard, he carefully slipped into the kitchen where he took one look at a nervously fidgeting Mrs. Schmidt, silently hurried to the front door, stepped out and, once he was sure his neighbor was back inside, gave the door a good clatter as if he were just arriving. “What’s up? Nobody at home? Hey, Schmidt!” he shouted as loud as he could, then—so as not to leave him any time to escape—immediately opened the door and blocked Schmidt’s way out of the kitchen. “Well, well!” he asked in a mocking voice. “Where are we going in such a hurry, pal?” Schmidt was utterly at a loss for words: “No, well I’ll tell you, buddy! Don’t you worry, pal. I’ll help you remember all right!” he continued with a deep frown. “You wanted to make off with the money! Am I right? Gussed

right the first try?” Schmidt still said nothing but just kept blinking. Futaki shook his head. “Well, pal. Who would have thought it?” They went back into the kitchen and sat down facing each other. Schmidt was nervously fiddling with objects on the stove. “Listen, pal . . .” Schmidt stuttered: “I can explain . . .” Futaki waved him away. “I don’t need any explanations! Tell me, is Kráner in on this?” Schmidt was forced to nod. “Up to a point.” “Sons of bitches!” Futaki raged. “You thought you’d put one over on me.” He bowed his head and thought. “And now? What happens now?” he eventually asked. Schmidt spread his arms. He was angry: “What do you mean: what now? You’re one of us, buddy.” “What do you mean?” Futaki inquired, mentally calculating the sums. “Let’s split it three ways,” Schmidt answered reluctantly: “But keep your mouth shut.” “You won’t have to worry about that.” Mrs. Schmidt was standing by the range and gave a despairing sigh. “Have you lost your minds? Do you think you can get away with this?” Schmidt acted as though he hadn’t heard her. He fixed his eye on Futaki. “There, you can’t say we haven’t cleared it up. But there’s something else I want to say to you, buddy. You can’t rat me out now.” “We’ve made a deal, haven’t we?” “Yes, of course, there’s no doubt about that, not for a second!” Schmidt continued, his voice rising to a plaintive whine. “All I ask is . . . I want you to lend me your share for a short time! Just for a year! While we settle down somewhere . . .” “And what other part of your anatomy do you want me to suck?!” Futaki snapped back at him. Schmidt flopped forward and grasped the edge of the table. “I wouldn’t ask you if you yourself hadn’t said you wouldn’t be leaving here now. What do you need it all for? And it’s just for a year . . . a year, that’s all! . . . We have to have it, you understand, we just have to. I can’t buy anything with the rags I’m standing up in. I can’t even get a plot of land. Lend me ten at least, eh?” “No way!” Futaki answered: “I don’t give a damn. I don’t want to rot here either!” Schmidt shook his head, so angry he was practically crying, then began again, obstinate but ever

more helpless, his elbows propped on the kitchen table that rocked each time he moved as if taking his part, begging his partner to “have a heart,” hoping his “pal” might respond to his pitiful gestures, and it wouldn’t have taken much more effort since Futaki had almost decided to give in when his eye suddenly lit on the million specks of dust swirling in a thin beam of sunlight and his nose became aware of the dank smell of the kitchen. Suddenly there was a sour taste on his tongue and he thought it was death. Ever since the works had been split up, since people had been in as much of a rush to get away as they had been to come here, and since he—along with a few families, and the doctor, and the headmaster who, like him, had nowhere else to go—had found himself unable to move, it had been the same, day after day, tasting the same narrow range of food, knowing that death meant getting used to, first the soup, then to the meat dishes, then, finally, to go on to consuming the very walls, chewing long laborious mouthfuls before swallowing, slowly sipping at the wine rarely enough set in front of him, or the water. He sometimes felt an irresistible desire to break off a chunk of nitrous plaster in the machine hall of the old enginehouse where he lived and to cram it into his mouth so that he might recognize the taste of the *Vigilance!* sign among the disturbing riot of normally ordered flavors. Death, he felt, was only a kind of warning rather than a desperate and permanent end. “It’s not as if I’m asking for a gift,” Schmidt continued, growing tired: “It’s a loan. You understand? A loan. I’ll return every last cent of it in precisely a year.” They sat at the table, both of them worn out. Schmidt’s eyes were burning from exhaustion, Futaki was furiously studying the mysterious patterns of the stone tiling. He mustn’t show he is afraid, he thought, though he would have found it hard to explain what it was he was afraid of. “Just tell me this. How many times did I go out to Szikes, all by myself, in that intolerable heat where a man is scared to breathe the air in case it sets fire to his insides?! Who got hold of the wood? Who built that sheepfold?! I have

contributed just as much as you, or Kráner, or Halics! And now you have the nerve to touch me for a loan. Oh yes, and it'll all be returned next time I see you, eh?!" "In other words," Schmidt replied, affronted, "you don't trust me." "Damn right!" Futaki snapped back. "You and Kráner meet up before dawn, planning to make off with all the money and then you expect me to trust you?! Do you take me for an idiot?" They sat silently together. The woman was clattering dishes by the stove. Schmidt looked defeated. Futaki's hands trembled as he rolled a cigarette and got up from the table, limped over to the window, leaned on his stick with his left hand and watched rain billowing over the rooftops. The trees were leaning with the wind, their bare branches describing threatening arcs in the air. He thought of their roots, the life-giving sap, of the soaked earth and of the silence, of the unspoken feeling of completion he so dreaded. "In that case tell me . . .!" he asked in a hesitant manner, "Why did you come back, this once . . ." "Why? why?!" Schmidt grumbled. "Because that's what occurred to us—and before we could think better of it we were on the way home, and back . . . And then there was the woman . . . Would I have left her here? . . ." Futaki nodded understandingly. "What about the Kráners?" he asked after a while. "What's your arrangement with them?" "They're stuck here, like us. They want to head north. Mrs. Kráner heard there was an old neglected orchard or something there. We'll meet by the crossroads after dark. That's what we arranged." Futaki gave a sigh: "A long day ahead. What about the others? Like Halics? . . ." Schmidt rubbed his fingers together despondently: "How should I know? Halics will probably sleep the whole day. There was a big party yesterday at the Hor-goses. His highness, the manager, can go to hell on the first bus! If there's any trouble on his account, I'll drown the sonofabitch in the next ditch, so relax, pal, relax." They decided to wait in the kitchen till night fell. Futaki drew up a chair by the window so he could keep an eye on the houses opposite while Schmidt was overcome by sleep,

slumped over the table, and began to snore. The woman brought the big iron-strapped military trunk out from behind the cupboards, wiped away the dust, inside and out, then wordlessly began packing their things. "It's raining," said Futaki. "I can hear," replied the woman. The weak sunlight only just succeeded in penetrating a jumbled mass of clouds that was slowly proceeding eastwards: the light in the kitchen dimmed as if it were dusk and it was hard to know whether the gently vibrating patches on the wall were merely shadows or symptoms of the despair underlying their faintly hopeful thoughts. "I'll go south," Futaki declared, gazing at the rain. "At least the winters are shorter there. I'll rent a little land near some town that's growing and spend the day dangling my feet in a bowl of hot water . . ." Raindrops were gently trickling down both sides of the window because of the finger-wide crack that ran all the way from the wooden beam to the window frame, slowly filling it up then pushing their way along the beam where they divided once more into drops that began to drip into Futaki's lap, while he, being so absorbed in his visions of faraway places that he couldn't get back to reality, failed to notice that he was actually wet. "Or I might go and take a job as a night watchman in a chocolate factory . . . or perhaps as janitor in a girls' boarding school . . . and I'll try to forget everything, I'll do nothing but soak my feet in a bowl of hot water each night, while this filthy life passes . . ." The rain that had been gently pouring till now suddenly turned into a veritable deluge, like a river breaking over a dam, drowning the already choking fields, the lowest lying of which were riddled with serpentine channels, and though it was impossible to see anything through the glass he did not turn away but stared at the worm-eaten wooden frame from which the putty had dropped out, when suddenly a vague form appeared at the window, one that eventually could be made out to be a human face, though he couldn't tell at first whose it was, until he succeeded in picking out a pair of startled eyes, at which point he saw "his own careworn features"

and recognized them with a shock like a stab of pain since he felt that what the rain was doing to his face was exactly what time would do. It would wash it away. There was in that reflection something enormous and alien, a kind of emptiness radiating from it, moving toward him, compounded of layers of shame, pride and fear. Suddenly he felt the sour taste in his mouth again and he remembered the bells tolling at dawn, the glass of water, the bed, the acacia bough, the cold flagstones in the kitchen and, thinking of it all, he made a bitter face. "A bowl of hot water! ... Devil take it! ... Don't I bathe my feet every day ...?" he pouted. Somewhere behind him there was the sound of choked-off sobbing. "And what's bugging you then?" Mrs. Schmidt did not answer him but turned away, her shoulders shaking with the sobs. "You hear me? What's the matter with you?" The woman looked up at him, then simply sat down on the nearby stool and blew her nose like someone for whom speech was pointless. "Why don't you say something?" Futaki insisted: "What the hell is wrong with you?" "Where on earth can we go!" erupted Mrs. Schmidt: "The first town we come to some policeman is bound to stop us! Don't you understand? They won't even ask our names!" "What are you blathering about?" Futaki angrily retorted: "We will be loaded with money, and as for you ... "That's exactly what I mean!" the woman interrupted him: "The money! You at least might have some sense! To go away with this rotten old trunk ... like a band of beggars!" Futaki was furious. "That's enough, now! Keep out of this. It has nothing to do with you. Your job is to shut up." Mrs. Schmidt would not let it rest. "What?" she snapped: "What's my job?" "Forget it," Futaki answered quietly. "Keep it down or you'll wake him up." Time was passing very slowly and, luckily for them, the alarm clock had long ago stopped working so there wasn't even the sound of ticking to remind them of time, nevertheless the woman gazed at the still hands as she gave the paprika stew the occasional stir while the two men sat wearily by the steaming plates in front of them, not touching

their spoons despite Mrs. Schmidt's constant badgering for them to get on with it ("What are you waiting for? Do you want to eat at night, soaked to the bone in the mud?"). They did not turn the light on although objects washed into each other during the agonizing wait, the pans by the wall coming to life along with the icons and it even seemed there was someone in the bed. They hoped to escape these hallucinatory visions by stealing glances at one another but all three faces radiated helplessness, and while they knew they couldn't get started till nightfall (because they were sure that Mrs. Halics or the manager would be sitting at their windows watching the path to Szikes with even greater anxiety now that Schmidt and Kráner were almost half a day late), every so often Schmidt or the woman made a move as if to say, screw caution, let's make a start. "They're off to see a movie," Futaki quietly declared. "Mrs. Halics, Mrs. Kráner and the manager, Halics." "Mrs. Kráner?" Schmidt snapped: "Where?" And he rushed to the window. "He's right. He's damn right," Mrs. Schmidt nodded. "Hush!" Schmidt turned on her: "Don't be in such a hurry, sweetheart!" Futaki calmed him: "That's a smart woman. We have to wait till dark anyway, don't we? And this way no one gets suspicious, right?" Schmidt was edgy but sat back down at the table and buried his face in his hands. Futaki carried on despondently puffing smoke by the window. Mrs. Schmidt drew out a length of twine from the depths of the kitchen cupboard and, because the locks were too rusty to close, tied the trunk up with it and set it down by the door before sitting down next to her husband and clasping her hands. "What are we waiting for?" asked Futaki. "Let's split up the money." Schmidt stole a glance at his wife. "Don't we have plenty of time for that, pal?" Futaki rose and joined them at the table. He spread his legs and, rubbing his stubbled chin, fixed his eyes on Schmidt: "I say we split it up." Schmidt ran a hand over his brow. "What are you worried about? You'll get your share when it's time." "Then what are you waiting for, pal?" "What's

with the fuss? Let's wait till we get Kráner's contribution." Futaki smiled. "Look, it's very simple. We just halve what you've got there. Then when we get what's owing we'll split that up at the crossroads." "All right," Schmidt agreed. "Fetch the flashlight." "I'll get it," the woman leapt up, agitated. Schmidt plunged his hand into his trench coat and brought out a package tied round with string, somewhat drenched through. "Wait," cried Mrs. Schmidt and quickly wiped the table with a rag. "Now." Schmidt shoved a piece of paper under the nose of Futaki ("The document," he said, "just so you see I am not trying to cheat you") who tipped his head to one side and briefly took stock of it before pronouncing: "Let's get counting." He pressed the flashlight into the woman's hand and watched the bank notes with shining eyes as they passed through Schmidt's stubby fingers and slowly piled up at the far side of the table, and, as he watched, his anger slowly evaporated, because now he understood how "a man's head might get so confused by the sight of so much cash that he'd risk a lot to possess it." Suddenly he felt his stomach cramp up, his mouth filled with saliva and, as the sweat-spotted wad in Schmidt's hand began to shrink and swell the piles on the other side of the table, the flickering unsteady light in Mrs. Schmidt's hand seemed to be shining in his eyes as if she were deliberately doing it to blind him and he felt dizzy and weak, recovering only when Schmidt's cracked voice announced: "That's the precise amount!" But just as he was reaching forward to take his half share somebody right by the window shouted: "Are you in, Mrs. Schmidt, darling?" Schmidt snatched the flashlight from his wife's hand and snapped it off, pointing to the table, whispering: "Quick, hide it!" Mrs. Schmidt, lightning fast, swept it all together and stuffed the bills between her breasts, mouthing almost silently: "Missus Ha-lics!" Futaki sprang to conceal himself between the range and the cupboard, back tight against the wall, visible only as two phosphorescent points, as if he were a cat. "Go out and tell her to go to hell!"

Schmidt whispered, escorting her as far as the door where she froze for an instant before giving a sigh and stepping out into the hall, clearing her throat as she did so. “All right, all right, I’m going!” “We’ll be fine providing she didn’t see the light!” Schmidt whispered to Futaki though he himself did not really believe that, and having hidden himself behind the door was so nervous he had a hard time standing still. “If she dares take a step in I’ll throttle her,” he thought in desperation and swallowed hard. Those early morning bells, Mrs. Halics’s unexpected appearance—it must be a conspiracy, there must be some significant connection, and as the slowly drifting smoke enveloped him it fired his imagination once more. “Maybe there’ll be life on the estate yet? They might bring new machines, new people might come, everything could start all over again. They could mend the walls, give the buildings a fresh coat of limewash and get the pump house going. They might need a machinist, mightn’t they?” Mrs. Schmidt stood in the door, her face pale. “You can come out,” she said in a hoarse voice and turned on the light. Schmidt leapt over to her, blinking furiously. “What are you doing? Turn it off! They might see us!” Mrs. Schmidt shook her head. “Forget it. Everyone knows I’m at home, don’t they?” Schmidt was obliged to nod in acknowledgment as he grabbed her arm. “So what happened? Did she notice the light?” “Yes,” Mrs. Schmidt replied, “but I told her I was so nervous on account of you still not having returned that I fell asleep waiting and when I suddenly woke and turned the light on the bulb blew. I said I was just changing the bulb when she called out and that was why the flashlight was on ...” Schmidt murmured in approval then grew anxious again: “What about us? What did she say ... did she spot us?” “No, I’m certain she didn’t.” Schmidt breathed a sigh of relief. “Then what in God’s name did she want?” The woman looked blank. “She’s gone mad,” she replied quietly. “No surprise there,” Schmidt remarked. “She said ...,” Mrs. Schmidt added, her voice hesitant, looking now at Schmidt, now at the

tensely attentive Futaki, “she said that Irimiás and Petrina were coming down the road ... they’re on their way to the estate! And that they might already have arrived at the bar ...” For a minute or so neither Futaki nor Schmidt was capable of saying anything. “Apparently the driver of the long-distance bus ... he saw them in town ...,” the woman broke the silence and bit her lip. “And that he set out—they set out—for the estate in this filthy weather, worse than judgment day ... The driver saw them as he turned off for Elek, that’s where he has his farmstead, as he was hurrying home.” Futaki sprang to his feet: “Irimiás? And Petrina?” Schmidt gave a laugh. “That woman! Mrs. Halics really has gone mad this time. She’s been at her Bible too much. It’s gone to her head.” Mrs. Schmidt stood stock-still. Then she spread out her helpless arms and ran over to the range and flung herself on the stool, propping her head on her hand: “If it’s true ...” Schmidt turned on her, impatient: “But they’re dead!” “If it turns out to be true ...,” Futaki repeated quietly as if completing Mrs. Schmidt’s line of thought, “then the Horgos kid was simply lying ...” Mrs. Schmidt suddenly raised her head to look at Futaki. “And we had only his word for it,” she said. “That’s right,” Futaki nodded and lit another cigarette, his hand trembling. “And do you remember? I said back then there was something not quite right about the story ... there was something about it I didn’t like. But no one listened to me ... and eventually I gave in and accepted it.” Mrs. Schmidt kept her eyes on Futaki as if she were trying to transfer her thoughts to him. “He lied. The kid simply lied. It’s not so hard to imagine. In fact it’s very easy to imagine ...” Schmidt stared nervously, now at him, now at his wife. “It’s not Mrs. Halics who’s gone mad, it’s you two.” Neither Futaki nor Mrs. Schmidt ventured an answer but looked at each other. “Have you lost your mind?!” Schmidt burst out and took a step toward Futaki: “You, you old cripple!” But Futaki shook his head. “No, my friend. No ... though you’re right, Mrs. Halics hasn’t gone mad,” he told Schmidt, then turned to the woman,

announcing: "I'm sure it's true. I'm going down to the bar." Schmidt closed his eyes and tried to govern his temper. "Eighteen months! Eighteen months they've been dead. Everyone knows that! People don't joke about such things. Don't fall for it. It's just a trap! You understand? A trap!" But Futaki hadn't even heard him, he was already buttoning his coat. "It'll be all right, you'll see," he declared, and you could tell by the firmness of his voice that his mind was made up. "Irimiás," he added, smiling and he put his hand on Schmidt's shoulder, "is a great magician. He could turn a pile of cow shit into a mansion if he wanted to." Schmidt lost his head entirely. He grabbed hold of Futaki's coat and yanked him closer. "You're the one who's a pile of cow shit, buddy," he grimaced, "and that's all you'll ever be, let me tell you, a pile of shit. You think I'm going to let a pea-brain like you do me down? No, pal, no. You're not going to get in my way!" Futaki calmly returned his gaze. "I've no intention of getting in your way, pal." "Yes? And what will become of the money?" Futaki bowed his head. "You can split it with Kráner. You can pretend that nothing's happened." Schmidt sprang to the door and barred their way. "Idiots!" he screamed: "You're idiots! Go fuck yourselves, the pair of you! But as for my money . . .," he raised his finger, "you will deposit that on the table." He looked menacingly at the woman. "You hear me, you lousy . . . You'll leave the money right here. Understand?!" Mrs. Schmidt made no move. A peculiar, unaccustomed light flashed in her eyes. She slowly rose and moved toward Schmidt. Every muscle of her face was tense, her lips had grown extraordinarily narrow and Schmidt found himself the object of such intense contempt and mockery that he was forced to step back and gaze at the woman in astonishment. "Don't you go screaming at me, you moron," said Mrs. Schmidt quite quietly: "I'm going out. You can do what you like." Futaki was picking his nose. "Look pal," he added, his voice also quiet, "if they are really here you won't be able to escape Irimiás anyway, you know that yourself. And what happens then? . . ."

Schmidt felt his way over to the table and slumped in a chair. "The dead resurrected!" he muttered to himself. "And these two happy to take the bait . . . Ha ha ha. I can't help laughing!" He brought his fist down on the table. "Can't you see what the game is?! They must have suspected something and now they want to lure us out . . . Futaki, old man, you at least should have a drop of sense in you . . ." But Futaki wasn't listening; he was standing by the window, his hands locked together. "Do you remember?" he said. "The time the rent was nine days late, while he . . ." Mrs. Schmidt brusquely cut him off: "He always got us out of a mess." "Filthy traitors. I might have guessed," Schmidt mumbled. Futaki moved away from the window and stood behind him. "If you're really so skeptical," he advised Schmidt, "let's send your wife on ahead . . . She can say she is looking for you . . . and so on . . ." "But you can bet your life on it—it's true," the woman added. The money remained in Mrs. Schmidt's bosom since Schmidt himself was quite convinced that was the best place for it though he insisted he would far rather it were secured there with a piece of string and they had to work hard to persuade him to sit down again because he was off somewhere to look for something. "All right, I'm going," said Mrs. Schmidt and was immediately in her coat, pulling on her boots and was off running, soon disappearing into the darkness through the ditches surrounding the carriageway leading to the bar, avoiding the deeper puddles, not once turning back to look at them, leaving them there, two faces by the window, the rain washing over them. Futaki rolled a cigarette and blew out smoke, happy and hopeful, all tension gone, the weight lifted from him, dreamily contemplating the ceiling; he was thinking of the machine hall in the pump house, already hearing the cough, the splutter, the painful but successful sound of machines long silent starting up again, and it was as though he could smell the freshly limewashed walls . . . when they heard the outside door open and Schmidt had just enough time to leap to his feet before Mrs. Kráner was announcing:

“They’re here! Have you heard?!” Futaki stood and nodded and put his hat on. Schmidt had collapsed at the table. “My husband,” Mrs. Kráner gabbled, “he’s already started and just sent me across to tell you, if you didn’t know already though I’m sure you know, we could see through our window that Mrs. Halics had dropped by, but I’ve got to go, I don’t want to bother you, and as for the money, my husband said, forget it, it’s not for the likes of us, he said and . . . he’s right because why hide and run, with never a moment of peace, who wants that, and Irimiás, well you’ll see, and Petrina, I knew that it couldn’t be true, any of it, so help me, I never trusted that sneaky Horgos kid, you can tell from his eyes, you can see for yourselves how he made it all up and kept it up till we believed him, I tell you, I knew from the start . . .” Schmidt examined her suspiciously. “So you’re in on it too,” he said and gave a short bitter laugh. Mrs. Kráner raised her eyebrows at that and disappeared through the door in confusion. “Are you coming, buddy?” Futaki inquired after a while and suddenly they were both at the door. Schmidt led with Futaki hobbling behind with his stick, the wind snapping at the edges of his coat as he held on to his hat to prevent it flying away into the mud and tapped his blind way in the darkness, while the rain poured pitilessly down washing away both Schmidt’s curses and his own words of encouragement that eventually resolved into a repeated phrase: “Don’t go regretting anything, old man! You’ll see. It’ll be cushy for us. Pure gold. A real golden age!”

w e A r e r eS U r r e c T e D

The clock above their heads shows a quarter before ten but what else should they be waiting for? They know what the neon light with its piercing buzz is doing on that ceiling with its hairline cracks and what the timeless echo of those slamming doors is all about; they know why those heavy boots with their half-moon metaled heels are clattering down those strangely high, tiled corridors, just as they suspect why the lights at the back have not been lit and why everything looks so tired and dim; and they would bow their heads in humble acknowledgment and with a degree of complicit satisfaction before this magnificently constructed system if only it were not the two of them sitting on these benches polished to a dull glow by the rumps of the hundreds upon hundreds who have occupied them before, obliged to keep their eyes on the aluminum handle of door Number Twenty-Four, so that, having gained admittance, they should be able to make use of the two or three minutes (“It’s nothing, just . . .”) to dispel “the shadow of suspicion that has fallen . . .” For what else is there to discuss except this ridiculous misunderstanding that has arisen on account of procedures initiated by some no doubt conscientious but overzealous official? . . . And so the words prepared for the occasion tumble over each other

and begin sparring round as in a whirlpool, having formed the occasional frail, if painfully useless, sentence that, like a hastily improvised bridge, is capable of bearing only the weight of three hesitant steps before there's the sound of a crack, when it bends, and then with one faint, final snap collapses under them so that time and time again they find themselves back in the whirlpool they entered last night when they received the sheet with its official stamp and formal summons. The precise, dry, unfamiliar language ("the shadow of suspicion that has fallen") left them in no doubt that it was not a matter of proving their innocence—for to deny the charge or, conversely, to demand a hearing, would be a waste of time—if only the opportunity might arise for a general chat where they might state their position regarding an all-but-forgotten matter, establish their identities and perhaps modify a few personal details. In the past, seemingly endless, months, ever since a stupid difference of opinion so slight it's hardly worth mentioning, had led to their being cut off from normal life, their earlier, now clearly frivolous, views had matured to a firm conviction, and if opportunity arose they could answer correctly any questions regarding such general ideas as might be grouped together under the heading of a "guiding principle" with startling certainty and without any torturous inner struggle; in other words they were beyond surprise now. And as regards this self-consuming and constantly recurring state of panic they could take courage and put it down to "the bitter experience of the past" because "no man could have got out of such a hole without some injury." The big hand is moving steadily closer to twelve when an official appears at the top of the stairs, his hands behind him, moving with light steps, his whey-colored eyes clearly fixed ahead of him until they are drawn to the two strange characters sitting there, when a faint flush of blood enters his gray, hitherto dead-looking face and he stops, raises himself on tiptoe, and then, with a tired grimace, turns away again to disappear down the stairs, taking a moment only to look up at

the other clock hanging beneath the NO SMOKING notice by which time his face has returned to its normal gray. The taller of the two men assures his companion, saying, "The two clocks say different times, but it could be that neither of them is right. Our clock here," he continues, pointing to the one above them with his long, slender and refined index finger, "is very late, while that one there measures not so much time as, well, the eternal reality of the exploited, and we to it are as the bough of a tree to the rain that falls upon it: in other words we are helpless." Though his voice is quiet it is a deep, musical, manly voice that fills the bare corridor. His companion who, it is obvious at a glance, is as different "as chalk from cheese" from the individual radiating such confidence, resilience and firmness of purpose, fixes his dull button-like eyes on the other's timeworn, suffering-hardened face and his whole being is suddenly suffused by passion. "Bough of a tree to the rain ..." he turns the phrase over in his mouth as if it were fine wine, trying to guess its vintage, realizing somewhat indifferently that it is beyond him. "You're a poet, old man, you really are!" he adds and marks it with a deep nod like someone frightened by the idea that he has inadvertently stumbled on some truth. He slides further up the bench so that his head might be at the same level as the other man's, sinks his hands into the pockets of the winter coat that seems to have been made for a giant and searches among the screws, sweets, nails, the postcard of the seaside, the alpaca spoon, the empty frame of a pair of spectacles and some loose Kalmopyrin tablets that are to be found in there until he discovers the piece of sweat-soaked paper and his brow begins to perspire. "If we don't put the lid on ..." He tries to prevent the words escaping his lips but it's too late. The creases on the taller man's face grow deeper, his lips tighten and his eyelids slowly close since he too finds it hard to suppress his emotions. Though they both know they made a mistake that morning in immediately demanding an explanation and bursting in through the marked door and not stopping

till they reached the innermost room: not because they received no explanation, they never even met the boss, since no sooner had they got there than he simply told the secretaries in the outer office (“Find out who these people are!”) and they found themselves outside the door. How could they have been so stupid? What a mistake! Now they were piling one mistake on top of another since even three days were not enough to recover from such bad luck. Because ever since they had been released to take a deep breath of the air of liberty and to cover every inch of those dusty streets and neglected parks, the sight of homesteads declining into autumnal yellow made them feel practically newborn, and they had taken strength from the sleepy expressions of the men and women they passed, from their bowed heads, from the slow gaze of melancholy youths leaning against a wall, the shadow of some as yet undefined ill fortune had followed them around, like something without a shape, and they could glimpse it in a pair of eyes that flashed up at them, or a movement here or there that would betray its presence as admonitory, inevitable. And just to crown all this (“Call me Petrina, I call that terrifying . . .”) the incident last night at the deserted station when—who knows, who could have suspected that someone else might want to spend the night on the bench next to the door that led to the platform?—a spotty-faced lout of a lad stepped through the revolving doors and, without a moment’s hesitation, strode over to them and pressed the summons into their hands. “Will there never be an end to this?” the taller one had asked the stupid-looking messenger and it is this that now comes to his shorter companion’s mind when he timidly remarks: “They are doing this deliberately, you know, in order to . . .” The taller one smiles wearily. “Don’t exaggerate. Just listen closely. Pay more attention. It’s stopped again.” The other man jerks back at this as if suddenly caught in some guilty act, is embarrassed, makes a waving movement and reaches for his improbably large ears, trying to smooth them down while flashing his tooth-

less gums. “As fate dictates,” he says. The taller man regards him with raised eyebrows for a while then turns away before registering his abhorrence. “Ugh! How ugly you are!” he exclaims and turns back from time to time as if he could not believe his eyes. The jug-eared one shrinks despondently away, his pear-shaped little head hardly visible above his turned-up collar. “You can’t judge by appearances . . .,” he mutters, wounded. At that moment the door opens and a man with a squashed nose and the look of a professional wrestler steps through with a considerable amount of fuss but instead of dignifying the two characters who rush to greet him with a glance—or saying, “Please come with me!”—marches past them and disappears behind a door at the end of the corridor. They stare at each other indignantly (as though they had reached the end of their tether), hang about for a while, desperate and ready to do anything, just one step from committing some unforgivable act when the door snaps open once again and a little fat man sticks his head out. “What are you waiting for?” he asks mockingly, then, with a wholly inappropriate gesture and a harsh “Aha!” flings the door wide before them. The large office inside is like a stockroom with five or six plainclothesmen bent over heavy shiny desks, above them a neon light like a vibrating halo, though there is a distant corner where the darkness has been squatting for many years, where even the light filtering through the closed slats of the blinds vanishes and disappears as if the dank air beneath were swallowing it all. Though the clerks are silently scribbling (some of them are wearing black patches on their elbows, others have glasses slipping down their noses) there is a constant whispering sound: one or another of them quickly casts half an eye at the visitors, squinting at them, sizing them up with barely concealed malice, as if speculating when they might make the one wrong move that will betray them, when the worn old overcoat might flap aside to reveal a flea-bitten butt, or when the holes in the shoes might reveal socks in need of darning. “What’s going on here!”

the taller one thunders as he crosses the threshold of the stockroom-like space ahead of the other, for there in the room he sees a man in shirtsleeves on all fours on the floor feverishly looking for something under his dark-brown desk. He keeps his presence of mind though: he takes a few steps forward, stops, fixes his eyes on the ceiling so as tactfully to ignore the embarrassing position of the man he must talk to. "Begging your pardon, sir!" he begins in his most charming manner. "We haven't forgotten our obligations. Here we are ready to comply with your request as expressed in your letter of last night, according to which you wish to have a few words with us. We are citizens, honest citizens, of this country and therefore would like—voluntarily, that goes without saying—to offer you our services, services that, if I may be so bold as to remind you, you have been kind enough to draw upon for a good many years, albeit in an irregular fashion. It will hardly have escaped your attention that there has been a regrettable intermission in these services when you have had to do without us. We guarantee, as employees of your organization, that, now, as always in the past, we reject shoddy work and indeed any other kind of disappointment. We are perfectionists. Believe us, sir, when we say that we offer you the same high standard of work to which you have been accustomed. Delighted to be at your service." His companion nods and is clearly moved, barely able to prevent himself from grasping his comrade's hand and giving it a firm shake. The chief meanwhile has got up off the floor, gulps down a white pill and, after struggling a little, manages to swallow it without a sip of water. He dusts off his knees and takes his place behind the desk. He crosses his arms and leans heavily on his worn old fake-leather folder, glaring at the two strange figures before him who are standing vaguely at attention, looking at something over his head. His mouth twists in pain and settles all the lineaments of his face into a sour mask. Without moving his elbows he shakes a cigarette free of the pack, puts it in his mouth and lights it. "What were you say-

ing?” he asks suspiciously, his expression puzzled, his feet twitching a nervous little dance under the table. The question hangs uselessly in the air while the two apparent derelicts stand stock-still, patiently listening. “Are you that shoemaker fellow?” the chief tries again and continues blowing out a long plume of smoke that rises above the tower of files on his desk and begins to swirl around him so it is minutes before his face becomes visible again. “No, sir . . .,” the jug-eared one replies as if deeply insulted. “We were summoned to appear here at eight o’clock . . .” “Aha!” the chief exclaims with satisfaction: “And why did you not appear on time?” The jug-eared man looks up accusingly from under his brow. “There must be some misunderstanding, if I may . . . We were here precisely on time, don’t you remember?” “As I understand it . . .” “No chief, you don’t understand anything!” the little fellow cuts him off, suddenly full of life: “The thing is that we, that is to say the man next to me and I, sure, we can do anything. We can make you furniture, farm your chickens, castrate your pigs, deal with your real estate, and repair anything, even things thought to be beyond salvation. You want us to be market traders—that’s fine. We can do anything you want. But come off it!” he snarls. “Don’t make us laugh! You know very well our job is to supply information, if I may put it like that. We’re on your payroll, if you care to remember. Our position, if you know what I mean, is . . .” The chief leans back in exhaustion, slowly examines them, his brow clears, he springs to his feet, opens a little door in the back wall and calls back to them from the threshold: “Just wait here. But no monkey business . . . you know what I mean!” Within a couple of minutes a tall, blond, blue-eyed man, rank of captain, appears before them, sits down at the table, carelessly stretches out his legs, and gives them a benign smile. “Do you have any papers?” he inquires politely. The jug-eared one searches in his enormously large pockets. “Paper? Certainly!” he announces in delight: “Just a moment!” He produces a slightly rumpled but perfectly clean sheet of

writing paper and puts it down in front of the captain. “Would you like a pen too?” the taller man inquires and reaches for his inside pocket. The captain’s face darkens for an instant then opens in a cheerful smile. “Very funny,” he grins. “You two certainly have a sense of humor.” Jug Ears modestly casts his eyes down. “True enough, you don’t get anywhere without it, chief . . .” “Yes, but let’s get to the point,” the captain grows serious: “Do you have papers of any other sort?” “Of course, chief. Give me a moment . . .!” He reaches into his pocket again and pulls out the summons. Flourishing it in the air with a gesture of triumph he puts it down on the table. The captain glances at it, then his face reddens and he bellows at them: “Can’t you read!?! Fucking idiots! Which floor does it say?!” The question is so unexpected that they take a step back. Jug Ears nods furiously. “Of course . . .,” he answers for want of anything better to say. The officer tips his head to one side. “What does it say?” “The second . . .,” the other replies and, by way of explanation, adds, “I beg to report.” “Then what are you doing here!?! How did you get here!?! Have you any idea what this office deals with!?” Both men shake their heads, feeling weak. “This is the RP section—Registry of Prostitutes,” the captain bellows at them leaning forward in his chair. But there is no sign of surprise. The shorter man shakes his head as if to say he doesn’t believe the captain, and purses his lips in thought, while his companion stands beside him with his legs crossed apparently studying the landscape picture on the wall. The officer props an elbow on the table to support his head and starts massaging his brow. His back is as straight as the road to righteousness, his chest is deep and wide, his uniform crisply washed and ironed, his perfectly starched blindingly white collar in splendid harmony with his fresh, rosy-cheeked countenance. One lock of his otherwise immaculately wavy hair is hanging over his sky-blue eyes and lends an irresistible charm to his whole appearance, an appearance that radiates a childlike innocence. “Let’s start,” he says in a stern, southern singsong voice,

“with your IDs.” Jug Ears produces two ragged-edged packages from his back pocket and pushes aside one of those big towers of files so that he might smooth the package out before handing it over but the captain snatches it from his hand with the impatience of youth and flicks through the pages military fashion without even looking at them. “What do they call you?” he asks the shorter man. “Petrina, at your service.” “Is that your name?” Jug Ears nods in melancholy fashion. “I would like to have your full name,” says the officer leaning forward. “That’s it, sir, that’s all there is,” Petrina answers with wide-eyed innocence then turns to his companion and whispers, “What can *I* do about it?” “What are you, a gypsy?” the captain snaps at him. “What, me?” Petrina asks, perfectly shocked: “Me, a gypsy?” “Then stop fooling about! Give me your name!” Jug Ears glances helplessly at his friend, then shrugs, looking utterly confused, as if unwilling to take responsibility for what he is about to say. “Well, Sándor-Ferenc-István . . . er . . . András.” The officer leafs through the ID document and notes menacingly, “It says József here.” Petrina looks as though he has been pole-axed. “Surely not, chief, sir! Would you mind showing me . . .” “Stay right there!” the captain orders him, unwilling to put up with any more nonsense. The taller man’s face shows no sign of anxiety, not even interest, and when the officer asks him his name, he blinks a little as if his mind had been elsewhere and courteously replies: “I beg you pardon, I didn’t get that.” “Your name!” “Irimiás!” His answer rings out, as if he were proud of it. The captain puts a cigarette in the side of his mouth, lights it with a clumsy movement, throws the burning match into the ashtray and puts it out with the matchbox. “I see. So you too have only one name.” Irimiás nods cheerfully: “Of course, sir. Doesn’t everyone?” The officer looks deep into his eyes, opens the door (“Is that all you have to say?”) and waves to them to follow him. They follow a couple steps behind him past the clerks with their sly looks, past the desks of the office outside, into the corridor and set off up the stairs. It is even

darker here and they almost trip over the turns of the stairs. A crude iron balustrade runs alongside them, its polished and worn underside streaked with rust as they move from step to step. Everywhere there is the sense of everything having been thoroughly cleaned and not even the heavy fishlike smell that follows them everywhere can quite mask it.

UPPER FLOOR

FLOOR 1

FLOOR 2

The captain, slender as an officer of the hussars, proceeds before them with long ringing strides, his shining, half-length military boots almost musical as they strike against the polished ceramic tiles; he casts not a single look back at them but they are acutely aware he is considering everything about them, all the way from Petrina's laborer's boots to Irimías's dazzlingly loud red tie, having perhaps memorized such details, or maybe because the thin skin stretched over the back of his neck is capable of receiving deeper impressions than the naked eye can discover. "Identification!" he barks at a lushly mustached, swarthy, large lump of a sergeant as they step through another door marked 24, into a smoky, stuffy hall, not slowing for an instant, indicating with a wave of his fingers that those leaping to their feet at his entrance should sit down, while snapping out his orders: "Follow me! I want the files! I want the reports! Give me extension 109! Then a line to town!" before he disappears behind a glazed door on the left. The sergeant remains stiffly at attention then, as he hears the lock click, wipes his arm across his sweating brow, sits down at the desk opposite the entrance and pushes a printed form in front of them. "Fill it out," he tells them, exhausted: "And sit down. But first read the instructions on the back of the page." There is no movement of air in the hall. There are three rows

of neon lights on the ceiling, the illumination is dazzling: the wooden blinds are closed here too. Clerks are running about nervously between a mass of desks: when they occasionally find themselves obstructing another's path in the narrow gangways between tables they impatiently push each other aside with brief apologetic smiles as a result of which the desks are shifted a few centimeters every time, leaving sharp scrape marks on the floor. Some refuse to move out of the way though the piles of work in front of them have grown into huge towers. They clearly prefer to spend most of their working time bickering with their colleagues, carping at them for constantly shoving them in the back or pushing their desks aside. Some perch in their red fake-leather chairs like jockeys, telephone receiver in one hand, a steaming cup of coffee in the other. From wall to wall, from the back of the hall to the front, there are aging female typists sitting in rows that are straight as a die, pecking at their machines. Petrina watches their feverish labor with astonishment, prodding Irimiás with his elbow though the other man simply nods, busily studying the "Instructions" on the back of the form. "Do you suppose there's a cafeteria here?" whispers Petrina but his companion irritably gestures for him to be quiet. Then he looks up from the document and starts sniffing the air, asking: "Can you smell it?" and points upward. "It smells marshy here," Petrina declares. The sergeant looks at them, beckons them closer and whispers: "Everything is rotting in this place . . . Twice in the last three weeks they've had to limewash the walls." There is a shrewd light in his deep-set, puffy eyes, his jowls constricted by his tight collar. "Shall I tell you something?" he asks with a knowing smile. He moves close so they can feel the steam of his breath. He starts to laugh silently as if unable to stop himself. Then he speaks, emphasizing each individual word like a set of land mines: "I suppose you think you can get out of this," he smiles, then adds: "But you're screwed." He looks mightily pleased with himself and taps the table three times as though repeating what

he had just said. Irimiás gives a superior smile and goes back to studying the document while Petrina stares in horror at the sergeant who suddenly bites his lower lip, gives them a contemptuous look and leans indifferently back in his chair, once again simply part of the dense matrix of background noise. Once they have completed their forms he leads them into the captain's office, all trace of fatigue, of the almost terminal exhaustion that had seemed to be his lot, vanishing from his features, his steps firm, his movements crisp, his speech military and sharp. The furnishings of the office suggest a measure of comfort. To the left of the writing desk stands an enormous potted plant on whose deep luxurious green the eye may rest, while in the corner by the door a leather sofa stretches complete with two leather armchairs and a smoking table of "modern" design. The window is covered by a heavy set of poisonously green velvet curtains: a strip of red carpet runs over the parquet flooring from the door to the desk. You can sense rather than see the fine dust sifting slowly from the ceiling, a dust hallowed and dignified by countless years. There is a portrait of some military figure on the wall. "Sit down!" the officer orders, pointing to three wooden chairs in a tight row in the far corner: "I want us to understand each other . . ." He leans back in his high-backed chair, pressing against the bone-colored wood, and fixes his eye on some distant point, some faint mark on the ceiling, while his voice, a surprisingly singsong voice, swims toward them through a clearing cloud of cigarette smoke, as though he were speaking from elsewhere, not from within the stifling fug that catches at their throats. "You've been summoned because you have endangered the project by your absence. No doubt you have noticed I've not given precise details. The nature of the project has nothing to do with you. I myself am inclined to forget the whole matter, but whether I do or not, depends on you. I hope we understand each other." He lets his words hang there for a moment, timelessly significant. They are like fossils cushioned by damp moss. "I suggest we put

the past aside,” he continues. “That is providing you accept my terms regarding the future.” Petrina is picking his nose; Irimiás trying to free his coat from under his companion’s rear. “You have no choice. If you say no I shall make sure you’re put away so long your hair will be gray by the time you get out.” “I beg your pardon, chief, but what are you talking about?” Irimiás interrupts. The officer continues as though he hasn’t heard him: “You have three days. Did it never occur to you that you should have been working? I know exactly what you’ve been up to. I give you three days. I think you should appreciate what is at stake here. I’m not making any wild promises beyond that, but three days you’ll get.” Irimiás considers protesting but thinks better of it. Petrina is genuinely terrified. “I’m fucked if I understand any of this, if you’ll pardon the expression . . .” The captain lets it go, pretends not to have heard, and carries on as if he were delivering himself of a verdict, a verdict that expects to be met with complaint but is willing to ignore it. “Listen carefully because I won’t say this again: no more delays, no more fooling around, no more trouble. All that is over. From now on you do what I say. Is that clear?” Jug Ears turns to Irimiás. “What’s he talking about?” “I haven’t the faintest idea,” Irimiás rumbles back. The captain shifts his gaze from the ceiling and his eyes darken. “Will you please shut up,” he drawls in his old-fashioned, singsong voice. Petrina sits, almost lies, on the chair, blinking in panic, his hands clasped across his chest, the back of his neck against the chair back, his heavy winter coat spread about him like petals. Irimiás is sitting upright, his mind working feverishly. His pointed shoes are a blinding bright yellow. “We have our rights,” he sniffs, the skin on his nose forming delicate wrinkles. The captain is annoyed and blows out smoke, a brief sign of exhaustion flickering across his face. “Rights!” he exclaims: “You talk of rights! The law for your type is simply something to be exploited! Something to cover your back when you get into trouble! But that’s all over . . . I’m not arguing with you because this isn’t a debating club, you

hear? I suggest you quickly get used to the idea that you do as I say. You will act legally from now on. You work within the law." Irimiás massages his knees with sweaty palms: "What law?" The captain frowns. "The law of relative power," he says, his face pale, his fingers turning white on the arms of the chair. "The law of the land. The people's law. Do these concepts mean nothing to you?" he asks, employing the less intimate form of "you" for the first time. Petrina is roused to speak ("What's going on here? Are we *te* or *maga* now? Are we fellow workers or not? Which is it? If you ask me I prefer . . .") but Irimiás restrains him, saying: "Captain, you know what law we're talking about as well as we do. That's why we're here. Whatever you may think of us, we are law-abiding citizens. We are aware of our duties. I would like to remind you that we have frequently demonstrated that to be the case. We are on the side of the law as much as you are. So why all these threats? . . ." The captain smiles mockingly, fixes his big, sincere eyes on Irimiás's inscrutable features and though the words sound friendly enough they can see there's real fury at the back of them. "I know everything about you . . . but the truth is . . .," he gives a great sigh, "I have to admit I am none the wiser for that." "That's good," the relieved Petrina prods his companion, then casts an endearing look at the captain who recoils from his gaze and stares threateningly back. "Because, you know, I can't work when I'm tense! I simply can't deal with it!" and then Petrina anticipates the officer, seeing and feeling that this is going to end badly: "Isn't it better to talk like this, rather than . . ." "You just shut that flabby face of yours!" the captain screams at him and leaps from his chair. "What do you think? Who the hell are you, you pair of cheapskates?! You think you can banter your way past me?!" He sits back down, enraged. "You think we're on the same side!?" Petrina is immediately on his feet, waving his hands about in panic, trying to salvage what he can of the situation. "No, of course not, for God's sake, beg to report we, how shall I put it, we wouldn't dream of it! . . ." The captain says

nothing, not a word, but lights another cigarette and stares fixedly ahead of him. Petrina stands there at a loss and gestures to Irimiás for help. "I've had enough of you two. That's it!" the officer announces in a steely voice: "I've had enough of the Irimiás-Petrina duo. I am fed up with creatures like you, miserable dogs who think I am answerable to them!" Irimiás quickly intervenes. "Captain, you know us. Why can't things remain as they were? Ask . . . ("Ask Szabó," Petrina helps him out) . . . Sergeant Major Szabó. There's never been any trouble." "Szabó has been retired," the captain answers bitterly, "I have taken over his files." Petrina leans over to him and squeezes his arm. "And here we are, just sitting here like a flock of sheep! . . . Many congratulations, chief, my heartiest congratulations!" The captain is irritated and pushes Petrina's hand away. "Back to your place! What do you think you're doing!" He shakes his head hopelessly then, because he sees they are genuinely shocked, he assumes a friendlier manner. "All right, now listen. I want us to understand each other. Please note, it is quiet here now. People are satisfied. That's just how it should be. But if they read the papers properly they would know that there is a real crisis out there. We are not going to allow that crisis to hem us in and destroy all we have achieved! That's a big responsibility, you understand, a serious responsibility! We are not going to allow ourselves the luxury of having characters like you wandering around wherever where they please. We don't want whispers and rumors here. I know you can be useful to the project. I know you have ideas. Don't think for an instant I don't know that! But I'm not interested in what you did in the past—you got what you deserved for that. You are to adapt yourselves to the new situation! Is that clear?!" Now Irimiás shakes his head. "Not at all, captain, sir. Nobody can make us do anything we don't want to. But when it comes to duty we will do what we can in our own way . . ." The captain leaps up again, his eyes bulging, his mouth starting to tremble. "What do you mean no one can make you do anything you don't want to?! Who the

hell are you to talk back to me?! Fuck you, you rotten, hopeless bastards! Filthy bums! You will report to me tomorrow morning at eight o'clock sharp! Now get lost! Scram!" So saying, he turns his back on them and his body gives a convulsive shudder. Irimiás lopes toward the door, his head hanging and before drawing it closed behind him in order to follow Petrina who—like a snake—is already slipping out of the room, he glances back a last time. The captain is rubbing his brow and his face . . . it is as if he were covered in armor; gray, dull, yet metallic; he seems to be swallowing light, some secret power is entering his skin; the decay resurrected from the cavity of the bones, liberated, is filling every cell of his body as if it were blood spreading to the extremities thereby announcing its unquenchable power. In that briefest of moments the rosy glow of health vanishes, the muscles tighten and once more the body begins to reflect light rather than absorb it, glittering and silvery, and the finely arched nose, the delicately chiseled cheekbones and the microscopically thin wrinkles are replaced by a new nose, new bones, new wrinkles that wipe away all memory of what had preceded them to preserve in a single mass everything which, years from now, will find itself interred six feet under. Irimiás closes the door behind him and begins to walk faster, crossing the busy hall to catch up with Petrina who is already out in the corridor, not even looking back to see whether his companion has followed him because he feels that if he did turn to see he might be called back in again. The light percolates through heavy clouds, the town breathes through their scarves, an unfriendly wind swirls down the street, houses, sidewalk and roadway soaking helplessly under the downpour. Old women are sitting at their windows gazing at the dusk through net curtains, their hearts contracting at the sight of faces fleeing beneath the eaves outside, their faces full of such wrongs and sorrows that not even the steaming cookies baked in hot ceramic stoves can banish them. Irimiás strides furiously through the town, Petrina following him on little feet,

complaining, indignant, getting left behind, occasionally stopping for a minute to recover his breath, his coat billowing in the wind. "Where now?" he asks miserably. But Irimiás does not hear him, moves ahead, muttering imprecations: "He'll regret this ... he'll regret this, the bastard ..." Petrina walks faster. "Let's just forget the whole shitty business!" he suggests, but his companion is not listening. Petrina raises his voice. "Let's head up river and see if we can get some action there ..." Irimiás neither sees nor hears him. "I'll wring his neck ..." he tells his partner and demonstrates how. But Petrina is just as stubborn. "There's so much we could do once we're there ... There's the fishing for example, you know what I mean ... Or, listen: say there's some lazy wealthy guy who, let us say, wants something built ..." Having stopped in front of a bar, Petrina puts his hand in his pocket and counts their money and then they go through the glazed door. Inside there are only a few people hanging around, a transistor radio in the lap of the old woman minding the toilets is ringing out noon bells; the sticky wiping up cloth, the tables with damp pools ready to witness a thousand little resurrections are mostly unoccupied for now, tipping this way and that; four or five men with cavernous faces, their elbows propped on tables some way from each other, are wearing disillusioned expressions or slyly eyeing the waitress, or staring into their glasses or studying letters, absentmindedly sipping at coffees, or cheap spirits or wine. A damp and bitter stench blends with cigarette smoke, sour breath rising to the blackened ceiling; beside the door, next to a smashed oil heater, a bedraggled rain-soaked dog trembles and stares panic-stricken outside. "Shift those lazy asses of yours!" shrieks a cleaning woman as she proceeds past the tables with a scrunched-up rag. Behind the counter, a girl with flaming red hair and a baby face is propping up a shelf laden with stale desserts and a few bottles of expensive champagne while painting her fingernails. On the drinkers' side of the counter leans a stocky waitress, cigarette in one hand and a dime novel in the other,

licking her lips in excitement every time she turns the page. On the walls a ring of dusty lamps serves for atmosphere. "A single, blended," says Petrina and leans on the counter next to his companion. The waitress doesn't even look up from her book. "And a Silver Kossuth," adds Irimiás. The girl behind the bar, clearly bored, levers herself away from the shelf, carefully puts down the bottle of nail polish, and pours out the drinks, her movements slow and sluggish, only taking the odd glance at what she is doing, then pushes one toward Irimiás. "Seven-seventy," she drawls. But neither man moves. Irimiás looks into the girl's face and their eyes meet. "The order was for a single!" he growls. The girl quickly looks away and fills two more glasses. "Sorry!" she says, a little abashed. "And I seem to remember ordering a pack of cigarettes too," Irimiás continues in a low voice. "Eleven-ninety," the girl gabbles, glancing over at her colleague who is stifling a giggle and waves at her to leave off. Too late. "What's so funny?" All eyes are fixed on them. The smile freezes on the waitress's face, she nervously adjusts her bra strap through her apron then shrugs. Suddenly everything has fallen quiet. Next to the window opening onto the street sits a fat man in a bus driver's cap: he watches Irimiás in astonishment then quickly finishes his piccolo and clumsily slams the glass down on the table. "Excuse me . . .," he stutters, seeing how everyone is looking at him. And at that point, one cannot quite tell from where, a gentle humming begins. Everyone is breathlessly watching everyone else because for a moment it seems as though it is a person, a living person doing the humming. They steal glances at each other: the humming becomes a tad louder. Irimiás raises his glass then slowly puts it down again. "Is someone humming here?" he mutters in irritation. "Is someone making a joke?! What the hell is it? A machine? Or, or might it be . . . the lamps? No, it is a person after all. Could it be that old bat by the toilets? Or that asshole over there in the gym shoes? What is this? Some kind of dissent?" Then it suddenly stops. Now there's only the silence, the

suspicious glances. The glass is trembling in Irimiás's hand; Petrina is nervously drumming on the counter. Everyone is sitting still, looking down, no one dares move. The old woman at the washrooms tugs the sleeve of the waitress. "Should we call the police?" The girl behind the bar can't stop giggling out of sheer nervousness so, to bring things to a head, she quickly turns on the tap in the sink and begins making a noise with the beer glasses. "We will blow them all up," says Irimiás in a strangled voice, then repeats it in a ringing bass: "We'll blow up the lot of them. We'll blow them up one by one. Cowards! Worms!" He turns to Petrina. "One stick of dynamite per jacket! That one there," he indicates someone behind him with his thumb, "will get one stuffed in his pocket. That one," he continues, glancing toward the fire, "will find one under his pillow. There'll be bombs up chimney flues, under doormats, bombs hung from chandeliers, bombs stuffed up their assholes!" The girl behind the bar and the waitress move closer to each other for comfort at the end of the counter. The patrons stare at each other in fright. Petrina weighs them up, his eyes full of hatred. "Blow up their bridges. Their houses. The whole town. The parks. Their mornings. Their mail. One by one, we'll do it properly, everything in the proper order . . ." Irimiás purses his lips and blows out smoke, pushing his glass to and fro in pools of beer. "Because one has to finish what one has started." "True enough, no point in shilly-shallying," Petrina nods furiously: "We'll bomb them in stages!" "All the towns. One after the other!" Irimiás continues as if in a dream. "The villages. The remotest little shack!" "Boom! Boom! Boom!" cries Petrina, waving his arms around: "You hear! Then BLAAM! The end, gentlemen." He pulls a twenty from his pocket, throws it down on the counter right in the middle of a pool of beer, the paper slowly drawing the liquid up. Irimiás too moves away from the bar and opens the door but then turns back. "A couple of days, that's all you have left! Irimiás will blow you to pieces!" he spits out by way of parting, curls his lip and, by way of a grand finale,

runs his gaze slowly over the terrified larval faces. The stench of sewers mixed with mud, puddles, the smell of the odd crack of lightning, wind tugging at tiles, power lines, empty nests; the stifling heat behind low ill-fitting windows . . . impatient, annoyed half-words of lovers embracing . . . demanding wails of babies, their cries sliding off into the tin-smell of dusk; streets pliable, parks soaked to their roots lying obedient to the rain, bare oaks, half-broken dry flowers, scorched grass all prostrate, humbled by the storm, sacrifices strewn at the executioner's feet. Petrina wheezes at Irimiás's heels. "Are we going to see Steigerwald?" But his companion does not hear him. He has turned up the collar of his houndstooth coat, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his head raised, and is hurrying blindly from street to street, never slowing, never looking back, his soaked cigarette drooping from his mouth, though he doesn't even notice it, while Petrina continues to curse the world with an inexhaustible supply of imprecations, his bow legs buckling every so often and, when he falls twenty paces behind Irimiás, vainly shouting after him ("Hey! Wait for me! Don't be in such a rush! What am I, a cow in a stampede?") though the other pays no attention at all and, to make matters worse, he treads in a puddle up to his ankles, gives a great puff, leans against the wall of a house and mutters, "I can't keep up with this . . ." But, after a couple of minutes, Irimiás reappears, his wet hair hanging over his eyes, his pointed bright-yellow shoes caked in mud. Water drips off Petrina. "Look at these," he says pointing to his ears, "Gooseflesh, frozen . . ." Irimiás nods reluctantly, clears his throat and says, "We're going to the estate." Petrina stares at him, his eyes popping out. "What . . . ? Now?! The two of us?! To the estate?!" Irimiás pulls another cigarette from the pack, lights it and quickly blows the smoke out. "Yes. Right now." Petrina leans against the wall. "Listen here, old friend, master, savior, slave driver! You'll be the death of me! I am frozen through, I'm hungry, I want to find somewhere warm where I can dry out and eat and I have no desire at all, God

knows, to tramp out to the estate in this foul weather, in fact I am quite disinclined to follow you, to run after you like a lunatic, damn your already damned soul! Damn it!" Irimiás gives a wave and replies indifferently, "If you don't want to stay with me go where you please." And he is gone. "Where are you going? Where are you off to now?" Petrina shouts after him in anger, setting off to follow him. "Where would you go without me? . . . Stop for a second. Come on!" The rain eases off a little as they leave the town. Night descends. No stars, no moon. At the Elek crossroads, a hundred yards ahead of them, a shadow sways; only later do they discover it is a man in a trenchcoat; he enters a field and the darkness swallows him. On either side of the highway there are gloomy patches of woodland as far as the eye can see, mud covering everything and, since the fading light blurs all clear outlines, consuming all traces of color, stable forms begin to move while things that should move stand as if petrified, so the whole highway is like a strange vessel run aground, idling and rocking on a muddy ocean. Not a bird is stirring to leave its mark on the sky that has hardened to a solid mass that, like a morning mist, hovers above the ground, only a solitary frightened deer rises and sinks in the distance—as if the mud itself were breathing—preparing to flee in the far distance. "Dear God!" Petrina sighs. "When I think it will be morning before we get there I get cramp in my legs! Why didn't we ask Steigerwald if we could borrow his truck? And that coat too! What am I? A circus strongman?!" Irimiás stops, puts his foot up on a milestone, pulls out a cigarette, they both take one, and light them using their hands as shelter. "Can I ask you something, killer?" "What?" "Why are we going to the estate?" "Why? Do you have anywhere to sleep? Do you have anything to eat? Money? Either you stop your eternal whining or I strangle you." "OK. Fine. I understand, this much anyway. But tomorrow we've got to go back, haven't we?" Irimiás grinds his teeth but says nothing. Petrina gives another sigh. "Look friend, you really could have thought of

something else with that clever head of yours! I don't want to stay with those people the way I am. I can't stand being in one place. Petrina was born under open skies, that's where he's lived all his life and that's where he'll die." Irimiás dismisses him with a bitter gesture: "We're in the shit, friend. There's nothing we can do about that for a while. We have to stay with them." Petrina wrings his hands. "Master! Please don't say things like that! My heart is already pounding." "OK, OK, don't crap in your pants. We'll take their money then we'll move on. We'll manage somehow . . ." They set off again. "You think they have money?" Petrina asks anxiously. "Peasants always have something." They proceed without speaking, mile after mile, they must be roughly halfway between the turnoff and the local bar; occasionally a star twinkles in front of them only to vanish again in the dense dark; sometimes the moon shines through the mist and, like the two exhausted figures on the paved road below, escapes with them across the celestial battlefield, pushing its way past every obstacle toward its target, right until dawn. "I wonder what the bumpkins will say when they see us." "It'll be a surprise," Irimiás replies over his shoulder. Petrina picks up the pace. "What makes you think they'll be there at all?" he asks in his anxiety. "I figure they'll have made tracks ages ago. They must have that much intelligence." "Intelligence?" grins Irimiás. "Them? Servants is what they were and that's what they'll remain until they die. They'll be sitting in the kitchen, shitting themselves in the corner, taking the odd look out of the window to see what the others are doing. I know these people like the back of my hand." "I don't know how you can be so sure of that, friend," says Petrina. "My hunch is that there won't be anyone there. Empty houses, the tiles fallen or stolen, at best one or two starved rats in the mill . . ." "No-o-o," Irimiás confidently retorts. "They'll be sitting in exactly the same place, on the same filthy stools, stuffing themselves with the same filthy spuds and paprika every night, having no idea what's happened. They'll be eyeing each other suspi-

ciously, only breaking the silence to belch. They are waiting. They're waiting patiently, like the long-suffering lot they are, in the firm conviction that someone has conned them. They are waiting, belly to the ground, like cats at pig-killing time, hoping for scraps. They are like servants that work at a castle where the master has shot himself: they hang around at an utter loss as to what to do . . ." "Enough poetry, boss, I am terrified enough already!" Petrina tries to calm himself while pressing his rumbling stomach. But Irimiás pays him no attention, he's on a roll. "They are slaves who have lost their master but can't live without what they call pride, honor and courage. That's what keeps their souls in place even if at the back of their thick skulls they sense these qualities aren't their own, that they've simply enjoyed living in the shadow of their masters . . ." "Enough," Petrina groans and rubs his eyes because the water keeps running down his flat forehead: "Look, don't be cross, but I just can't bear listening to such stuff right now! . . . You can tell me all about them tomorrow, for now I'd sooner you talked about a good steaming bowl of bean soup!" But Irimiás ignores this too and goes on undisturbed. "Then, wherever the shadow falls they follow, like a flock of sheep, because they can't do without a shadow, just as they can't do without pomp and splendor either," ("For God's sake! Cut it out old man, please! . . ." Petrina cries in his agony) "they'll do anything not to be left alone with the remnants of pomp and splendor, because when they are left alone they go mad: like mad dogs they fall on whatever remains and tear it to bits. Give them a well-heated room, a cauldron bubbling with paprika stew, a few dogs, and they'll be dancing on the table every night, and even happier under warm bedclothes, panting away, with a tasty piece of the neighbor's stout wife to tuck into . . . Are you listening to me Petrina?" "Ayayay," the other sighs in reply and adds in hope: "Why? Have you finished?" By now they can see the blown-over fences of the roadside houses, the tumbledown shed, the rusty water tank, when right beside them, a hoarse voice calls them

from behind a high stack of weeds: "Wait! It's me!" A twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy, completely chilled and soaked to the bone, wearing trousers rolled up to the knee, rushes toward them, drenched, trembling, his eyes shining. Petrina is the first to recognize him. "So it's you ...? What are you doing here, you little good-for-nothing!?" "I've been hiding here for hours ...," he announces with pride, and quickly looks down. His long hair hangs in knots over his spotty face, a cigarette glowing between his bent fingers. Irimiás takes patient stock of the boy who steals the odd look at him but immediately lowers his eyes again. "So what do you want?" Petrina quizzes him, shaking his head. The boy steals another glance at Irimiás. "You promised ..." he starts, stutters and stops, "that ... that if ..." "Come on boy, spit it out!" Irimiás hassles him. "That if I told people that you were ..." the boy finally blurts out kicking the ground all the while, "... dead, then you'd fix me up with Mrs. Schmidt ..." Petrina pulls the boy's ear and snaps at him: "What's this? No sooner hatched and out of the egg but you already want to climb up ladies' skirts, you little scoundrel! What next?!" The boy frees himself and shouts, his eyes flashing in anger, "I tell you what you should be pulling, you old goat. The skin off your dick!" If Irimiás did not intervene there'd be a fight. "Enough!" he bellows. "How did you know we were on the way?" The boy stands a careful distance from Petrina, rubbing his ear. "That's my business. It doesn't matter anyway ... Everyone knows by now. The driver told them." Petrina is cursing, looking up at the sky but Irimiás gestures for him to be quiet ("Use your brains! Leave him alone!") and turns to the boy: "What driver?" "Kelemen. He lives by the Elek turning, that's where he saw you." "Kelemen? He's become a bus driver?" "Yeah, since spring, on the cross-country route. But the bus isn't in service at the moment so he has time to loaf around ..." "OK," says Irimiás and sets off. The boy hurries to keep pace with him. "I did what you asked me to do. I hope you'll keep your part of ..." "I generally keep my promises," Irimiás

answers coolly. The boy follows him like a shadow; sometimes he catches up with him and squints up at his face then falls behind again. Petrina trails still further behind, a long way back, and though they can't make out his voice they are aware he is continually cursing the ceaseless rain, the mud, the boy, and the world at large ("to hell with it all!"). "I still have the photograph!" says the boy some two hundred yards on. But Irimiás does not hear him or pretends not to have heard, his head raised high he is striding down the middle of the road, slicing the darkness with his hooked nose and sharp chin. The kid tries again: "Don't you want to see the photograph?" Irimiás turns slowly to look at him. "What photograph?" Petrina has caught up with them. "Do you want to see?" Irimiás nods. "Stop beating around the bush, you little devil," Petrina hurries him. "You won't be cross?" "No. OK?" "You must let me hold it!" the boy adds and reaches into his shirt. In the photograph they are standing in front of a street vendor, Irimiás on the right, his hair combed and parted on the side, wearing a houndstooth-check jacket and a red tie, the crease on his trousers broken at his knee; Petrina is beside him in a pair of satin britches and an outsize undershirt, the sun shining through his jug ears. Irimiás has screwed up his eyes and gives a mocking smile, Petrina is solemn and ceremonial; his eyes happen to be closed, his mouth slightly open. Someone's hand intrudes into the picture on the left, the fingers holding a banknote, a fifty. Behind them a merry-go-round that has been tipped over, or is in process of being tipped over. "Well, would you look at that!" Petrina remarks in delight, "It's really us, friend. I'll be darned if it isn't! Pass it over, let me get a better look at that old mug of mine." The boy pushes his hand away. "Nah! Get lost! You think this is a free show I'm giving here! Get your filthy paws off," and so saying he slips the photo back in its little clear plastic sleeve and back inside his shirt. "Aw, come on kid!" Petrina purrs, pleading. "Let's have another look. I hardly had a chance to see anything." "If you want to see more of it ... then ..." the boy

hesitates, “then you’ll have to fix me up with the bar owner’s wife. She has nice big tits too!” Petrina curses and sets off. (“What next, you brat!”) The boy slaps him on the back then rushes after Irimiás. Petrina fishes in the air after him for a while then he remembers the photograph, smiles and hums, and walks a little faster. They’re at the crossroads: from here it’s only half an hour. The boy looks at Irimiás adoringly, leaping now to the left, now to the right of him ... “Mari is screwing the bar owner ...” he loudly explains as he goes, taking the odd puff at his cigarette that has burned right down to his fingers by now. “... Mrs. Schmidt does it with the cripple, has for a long time, the headmaster does it to himself ... Really repulsive ... you can’t begin to imagine, ugh! ... My sister has gone totally crazy, does nothing but listen and spy, she spies on everyone all the time, Ma beats her but it’s no use, nothing is of any use, it’s like people said, she will remain gaga all her life ... believe it or not, the doctor just sits at home all the time, doing nothing, absolutely nothing! Just sits there all day, all night, he even sleeps in his chair, and his whole place smells, it’s like a rat’s nest, the light on day and night, not that it matters to him, he sits there smoking high-class cigarettes, you’ll see, it’s just like I told you. And, I almost forgot, today’s the day when Schmidt and Kráner are bringing the money home for the poultry, yes, that’s what they’ve all been doing since February, except Ma, because the filthy swine did not include her. The mill? Nobody goes there, the place is full of rooks, and my sisters because that’s where they go to whore, but what idiots, just imagine! Ma takes all their money and all they do is sit and weep! I wouldn’t let that happen, you can be sure of that. There in the bar? That doesn’t work any more. The landlord’s wife is so full of herself now, she’s swollen up like a cow’s ass, but luckily she has moved into the town house at last and will stay there till spring, because she said she wasn’t going to stay here up to her neck in mud, and, you have to laugh, the landlord has to go home once a month and when he comes back it’s like he’s had

the shit kicked out of him, she lays into him so . . . In any case he has sold that great Pannón bike he had and bought some crap machine that he's having to push around all the time, and everyone's around, the whole estate when it starts up—because he is always delivering something to somebody—but then everyone has to push it, that's if the engine starts at all . . . And, yes, he tells everyone that he has won some county race riding that wreck, you have to laugh! He's with my little sister for now because we owe him for seed since last year . . .” By now the window of the bar is visible, glowing ahead of them, but there is no sound, not a single word to be heard, as if the place were deserted, not a soul . . . but now, someone is playing the harmonica . . . Irimiás scrapes the mud off his lead-heavy shoes, clears his throat, cautiously opens the door, and the rain begins again, while to the east, swift as memory, the sky brightens, scarlet and pale blue and leans against the undulating horizon, to be followed by the sun, like a beggar daily panting up to his spot on the temple steps, full of heartbreak and misery, ready to establish the world of shadows, to separate the trees one from the other, to raise, out of the freezing, confusing homogeneity of night in which they seem to have been trapped like flies in a web, a clearly defined earth and sky with distinct animals and men, the darkness still in flight at the edge of things, somewhere on the far side on the western horizon, where its countless terrors vanish one by one like a desperate, confused, defeated army.