

And your ashes will be called, and will be told:

“Return that which does not belong to you;

reveal what you have kept to this time.”

For by the word was the world created, and by the word shall we be resurrected.

—Revelation of Baruch ben Neriah. 4, XLII

Darius and Parysatis had two sons, the elder Artaxerxes and the younger Cyrus.

Interviews start at eight in the morning. Everyone's still sleepy, crumpled, and sullen—employees, interpreters, policemen, and refugees alike. Rather, they still need to become refugees. For now they're just GS. That's what these people are called here. *Gesuchsteller*.¹

He's brought in. First name. Last name. Date of birth. Thick lips. Pimple. Clearly older than sixteen.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum in Switzerland.

Answer: I lived in an orphanage since I was ten. Our director raped me. I ran away. At the bus stop I met drivers taking trucks across the border. One took me out.

Question: Why didn't you go to the police and file a statement against your director?

Answer: They would have killed me.

1. A person who has filed for asylum. (*Ger.*)

Question: Who are “they”?

Answer: They’re all in it together. Our director took me, another kid, and two girls, put us in a car, and drove us to a dacha. Not his dacha, I don’t know whose. That’s where they all got together, all the bosses, the police chief, too. They were drinking and made us drink, too. Then they put us in different rooms. A big dacha.

Question: Have you cited all the reasons why you are requesting asylum?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Describe your route. What country did you arrive from, and where did you cross the border of Switzerland?

Answer: I don’t know. I was riding in a truck and they put boxes around me. They gave me two plastic bottles—one with water, the other for piss—and they only let me out at night. They dropped me off right here around the corner. I don’t even know what the town’s called. They told me where to go to turn myself in.

Question: Have you ever engaged in political or religious activity?

Answer: No.

Question: Have you ever been tried or investigated?

Answer: No.

Question: Have you ever sought asylum in other countries?

Answer: No.

Question: Do you have legal representation in Switzerland?

Answer: No.

Question: Do you consent to expert analysis to determine your age from your bone tissue?

Answer: What?

During breaks you can have coffee in the interpreters’ room. This side looks out on a construction site. They’re putting up a new building for a refugee intake center.

My white plastic cup keeps sparking right in my hands. In fact, the whole room is lit up by reflected sparks. A welder has set himself up right outside the window.

There’s no one here. I can read quietly for ten minutes.

And so, Darius and Parysatis had two sons, the elder Artaxerxes and the younger Cyrus. When Darius was taken ill and felt the approach of death, he demanded both sons come to him. At the time the elder son was nearby, but Darius had sent for Cyrus to another province, over which he had been placed as satrap.

The pages of the book are flashing in the reflected sparks, too. It hurts to read. After each flash, the page goes dark.

You close your eyes and it penetrates your eyelids, too.

Peter peeks in the door. Herr Fischer.² Master of fates. He winks: it’s time. And a spark lights him up, too, like a camera flash. That’s how he’ll be imprinted, with one squinting eye.

Question: Do you understand the interpreter?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Your last name?

Answer: ***.

Question: First name?

Answer: ***.

Question: How old are you?

Answer: Sixteen.

Question: Do you have a passport or other document attesting to your identity?

Answer: No.

Question: You must have a birth certificate. Where is it?

Answer: It burned up. Everything burned up. They set fire to our house.

Question: What is your father’s name?

2. Mr. Fischer. (Ger.)

Answer: *** ***. He died a long time ago. I don't remember him at all.

Question: The cause of your father's death?

Answer: I don't know. He was sick a lot. He drank.

Question: Give me your mother's first name, last name, and maiden name.

Answer: ***. I don't know her maiden name. They killed her.

Question: Who killed your mother—when, and under what circumstances?

Answer: Chechens.

Question: When?

Answer: Just this summer, in August.

Question: On what date?

Answer: I don't remember exactly. The nineteenth, I think, or maybe the twentieth. I don't remember.

Question: How did they kill her?

Answer: They shot her.

Question: Name your last place of residence before your departure.

Answer: ***. It's a small village near Shali.

Question: Give me the exact address: street, house number.

Answer: There is no address there. There's just one street and our house. It's gone. They burned it down. And there's nothing left of the village, either.

Question: Do you have relatives in Russia? Brothers? Sisters?

Answer: I had a brother. Older. They killed him.

Question: Who killed your brother—when, and under what circumstances?

Answer: Chechens. At the same time. They were killed together.

Question: Do you have other relatives in Russia?

Answer: There's no one else left.

Question: Do you have relatives in third countries?

Answer: No.

Question: In Switzerland?

Answer: No.

Question: What is your nationality?

Answer: Russian.

Question: Confession?

Answer: What?

Question: Religion?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Orthodox?

Answer: Yes. I just didn't understand.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum in Switzerland.

Answer: Chechens kept coming over and telling my brother to go into the mountains with them to fight the Russians. Otherwise they'd kill him. My mother hid him. That day I was coming home and I heard shouts through the open window. I hid in the bushes by the shed and saw a Chechen in our room hitting my brother with his rifle butt. There were a few of them there, and they all had submachine guns. I couldn't see my brother. He was lying on the floor. Then my mother lunged at them with a knife. The kitchen knife we use to peel potatoes. One of them shoved her up against the wall, put his AK to her head, and fired. Then they went out, poured a canister of gasoline over the house, and lit it. They stood around in a circle and watched it burn. My brother was still alive and I heard him screaming. I was afraid they'd see me and kill me, too.

Question: Don't stop. Tell us what happened then.

Answer: Then they left. And I sat there until dark. I didn't know what to do or where to go. Then I went to the Russian post on the road to Shali. I thought the soldiers would help me somehow. But they were afraid of everyone themselves and drove me away. I wanted to explain to

them what happened, but they fired in the air to make me go away. Then I spent the night outside in a destroyed house. Then I started making my way to Russia. And from there to here. I don't want to live there.

Question: Have you cited all the reasons why you're requesting asylum?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Describe your route. What countries did you travel through and by what means of transport?

Answer: Different ones. Commuter trains and regular ones. Through Belarus, Poland, and Germany.

Question: Did you have money to buy tickets?

Answer: How could I? I just rode. Avoided the conductors. In Belarus they caught me and threw me off the train while it was moving. Good thing it was still going slowly and there was a slope. I fell well and didn't break anything. I just tore the skin on my leg on some broken glass. Right here. I spent the night in the train station and some woman gave me a bandaid.

Question: What documents did you present upon crossing borders?

Answer: None. I walked at night.

Question: Where and how did you cross the border of Switzerland?

Answer: Here, in, what's it . . .

Question: Kreuzlingen.

Answer: Yes. I just walked past the police. They only check cars.

Question: What funds did you use to support yourself?

Answer: None.

Question: What does that mean? You stole?

Answer: Different ways. Sometimes yes. What was I supposed to do? I get hungry.

Question: Have you ever engaged in political or religious activity?

Answer: No.

Question: Have you ever been tried or investigated?

Answer: No.

Question: Have you ever sought asylum in other countries?

Answer: No.

Question: Do you have legal representation in Switzerland?

Answer: No.

No one says anything while the printer is printing out the interrogation transcript.

The guy picks at his dirty black nails. His jacket and filthy jeans stink of tobacco and piss.

Leaning back and rocking on his chair, Peter looks out the window. The birds are chasing down a plane.

I draw crosses and squares on a pad, divide them into triangles with diagonal lines, and fill them in to create relief.

There are photographs on the walls around us—the master of fates is crazy about fishing. Here he is in Alaska holding a big old fish by the gills, and over there it's something Caribbean with a big hook poking out of its huge gullet.

Over my head is a map of the world. All stuck with pins with multicolored heads. Black ones are stuck into Africa, yellow ones poke out of Asia. The white heads are the Balkans, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, and the Caucasus. After this interview one more pin will be added.

Acupuncture.

The printer falls silent and blinks red. It's out of paper.

My good Nebuchadnezzasaurus!

You have already received my hasty note with my promise of details to come. Here they are.

After a day spent in a place with bars on the windows, I came home. I ate macaroni. I read your letter, which made me so happy. I

began looking out the window. The wind was driving the twilight. The rain fell and fell. A red umbrella lay on the lawn, like a slit in the grass pelt.

But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

It is not every day, truly, that the postman spoils us with missives from foreign lands! Especially one like this! Amid the bills and ads—unexpected joy. Your letter. In which you describe in detail your Nebuchadnezzasaurus realm, its glorious geographic past, the ebbs and flows of its history, the ways of its flora, the habits of its fauna, its volcanoes, laws, and catapults, and the cannibalistic inclinations of its populace. It turns out, you even have both vampires and draculas! And so, this means, you are emperoring. I am flattered.

True, your writing abounds in grammatical errors, but really, what does that matter? You can learn to correct your mistakes, but you may never send me a missive like this again. Emperors grow up so quickly and forget about their empires.

I cannot get my fill of the map you included of your island homeland, the painstaking labor of your inspired imperial cartographers. And you know, I just may pin it up here on the wall. I'll look at it and try to guess where you are there right now, among those mountains, deserts, lakes, felt-tip bushes, and capitals. What have you been up to? Have you already moved from your summer residence to your Autumn Palace? Or are you already asleep? Your unsinkable navy guards your sleep. There go the triremes and submarines in file around your island.

What a glorious name for a benevolent sovereign! And in multicolored letters! I even have a few guesses as to where you got the idea, but I will keep them to myself.

In your missive, you ask me to inform you about our distant power, which is as yet unknown to your geographers and explorers. How could I fail to answer your question!

What shall I tell you about our empire? It is promised, hospitable, skyscrapered. You can gallop for three years without galloping all the

way across. For number of mosquitoes per capita during the sleepless hours, it has no equal. For fun, the squirrels run along my fence.

Our map abounds in white patches when snow falls. The borders are so far away no one even knows what the empire borders on: some say the horizon; according to other sources, the final cadenza of the angels' trumpets. We know for a fact that it is located somewhere to the north of the Hellenes, along the coastline of the ocean of air where our unsinkable cloud fleet sails in file.

There is still flora, but all that's left of the fauna are the tops of those trees that resemble schools of fry. The wind frightens them.

The flag is a chameleon, every law has a loophole, and I personally have no knowledge of any volcanoes.

The main question that has occupied imperial minds for more than a generation is this: Who are we and why are we here? The answer to it, for all the apparent obviousness, is muddled: in profile, Hyperboreans; en face, Sarmatians—in short, either Orochs or Tungus. And each is a fiddle. I mean riddle.

The beliefs are primitive but not without a certain poeticism. Some are convinced that the world is an enormous elk cow whose fur is the forest, the parasites in its fur are the taiga beasts, and the insects hovering around it are the birds. Such is the universe's mistress. When the elk cow rubs up against a tree, everything living dies.

In short, in this empire, which someone has deemed the best in the world, your humble servant—do you care if I'm not a chief?—well, I'm no chief. How can I explain to you, my good Nebuchadnezzasaurus, what we do here? All right, let me try this. After all, even these fry out the window, who form a school and have no inkling that it's just the wind, are convinced that someone is waiting for each of them, remembers them, knows their face—every last vein and freckle. And there's no convincing them otherwise. And here each of the celestial beasts pushes forward, two by two: blunderers and glowerers, truthseekers and householders, lefties and

righties, mobsters and taxidermists. And no one understands anyone. And so I serve. An interpreter in the chancellery for refugees in the defense ministry of paradise.

And each person wants to explain something. He hopes they'll hear him out. But here we are with Peter. I'm interpreting the questions and answers, and Peter is taking notes and nodding, as if to say, Of course I believe you. He doesn't believe anyone. Some woman comes and says, "I'm a simple shepherdess, a foundling, I don't know my parents, I was raised by an ordinary goatherd, poor Drias." And so the hoodwinking begins. The trees are in fruit; the plains in grain; there are willows on hills, herds in meadows, and everywhere the crickets' gentle chirp and the sweet scent of fruit. Pirates lie in wait, the enemy at the gates. Well-groomed nails blaze up in the lighter's flame. "After all, I grew up in the country and never so much as heard the word 'love.' I pictured her IUD looking something like a couch spring. Oh, my Daphnis! They separated us, ill-starred that we were! It was one showdown after another. First the Tyre gang attacks, then the Methymna hosts insist on their rights. Daphnis accompanied me like a guard when I went to see clients. A hairstyle affects how your day goes—and your life as a result. But do they see what they did to my teeth? My teeth weren't all that great to begin with. But that's from my mama. She used to tell me how she would flake plaster off the stove when she was a child and eat it. She wasn't getting enough calcium. And when I was carrying Yanochka, I'd walk off with the teachers' chalk at the institute and gnaw on it. Love is like the moon: if it's not waxing, it's waning, but it's the same as the last time, always the same." Peter: "That's it?" She: "That's it." "Well then, madam," he proposes, "your fingerprints." "What for?" She's dumbfounded. "You've been tracked down in our imperial-wide card file." And he knees her up the ass. But she's already shouting from the elevator, "You aren't human beings; you're still cold clay. They've sculpted you but they haven't breathed a soul into you!"

Whereas another couldn't string two words together properly at all. And his diction was like a water faucet's. I agonize, trying to sort out what he's gushing about, while Peter, still at his desk, is laying out pencils and toothpicks in a row, as if on parade, as if he were the desk marshal reviewing a parade. We're on the clock. No one is in any hurry. Peter likes order. And this GS is muttering something about open sesame and shouting for someone to get the door. He's babbling about white circles on gates, then red ones. He starts assuring us that he was sitting by himself in the wineskin, not touching anyone, not bothering anyone, but he got the boiling oil treatment. "There," he shouts, "you see? Is that really right? Boiling oil on a live person?" But all that's necessary to refuse the rogue is to find discrepancies in his statements. Peter gets a little book off his caseload shelf and things start moving. "Tell me, dear man, how many kilometers from your Bagdadovka to the capitals? What is the piaster's rate of exchange against the dollar? What national holidays are celebrated in the country that abandoned you besides the Immaculate Conception and the first snowman? What color are the streetcars and wineskins? And how much is a Borodinsky loaf?"

Or say the Jews are returning from Babylonian captivity, and they start singing the chorus from the third act of *Nabucco*, and our chief asks them: "What language do they speak in the Chaldean kingdom?" They: "Akkadian." He: "What is the temple to the god Marduk in Babylon called?" They: "Esagila." He: "And the Babylonian tower?" They: "Etemenanki." He: "To what goddess are the northern gates dedicated?" They: "Ishtar, the goddess Venus. And the Sun is personified by Shamash, the Moon by Sin. Mars is Nergal. The scoundrel Babylonians see Ninurt in Saturn, Nabu in Mercury, and Marduk himself is identified with Jupiter. By the way, the seven-day week comes from these seven astral gods. Did you know that?" He: "I ask the questions here. The illegitimate daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, second letter 'b,' seven letters." They: "What kind of fools do you take us for? Abigail!"

Before Peter, Sabina was our chief. She, on the contrary, believed everyone. And didn't ask questions from the omniscient book. And never used her stamp "Prioritätsfall." So she was fired. But Peter lets nearly everyone have it. On the first page of their file. This means an expedited review of the case in view of its obvious rejection. Here the GS signs the transcript, says goodbye, smiles ingratiatingly at the master of fates, at the interpreter, and at the guard with the halberd who has come for him, and hopes that now everything will be all right, but as soon as the door closes, Peter stamps it.

This paycheck was not for Sabina. When the interpreter used to go to the café across the street with her during break, she would complain that when she got home from work and sat down to eat, she would see the woman who had wept at the interview that afternoon telling her how they had pulled out her son's nails while this same little nail-less boy was sitting next to her in the waiting room. Children are questioned separately from their parents.

"You can't take pity on anyone here," Sabina said once. "But I take pity on them all. You just have to know how to detach, be a robot, question-answer, question-answer, fill out the form, sign the transcript, send it to Bern. Let them decide there. No, I have to find another job."

Sabina was very young to be our chief. After she was fired, she left for the opposite end of the empire and sent the interpreter a bizarre postcard. But none of that matters. Maybe I'll explain later someday. Or not.

I think we've been sidetracked, my good Nebuchadnezzasaurus.

What else makes our empire glorious? Just imagine, we have submarines, and deserts, and even a Dracula—not a vampire, the real thing. Basically everything here is the real thing.

What else? The wound in the grass scabbed over—darker.

Oh yes, I forgot to say that cannibalism has not gone out of style here. Moreover, people are consumed not just by anyone but by the autocrat personally—I don't know if it's a he or she, I haven't

checked the court calendar in a long time, and after all, gender is all a matter of dialect. In short, there's just one Herod the Great, but if you don't think about it all the time, then you could burst into song for sheer joy. At the streetcar stop by the train station today, someone got out, whistling.

It's funny. Years from now you'll receive this letter and may not even remember that there was once an emperor of this marvelously pin-studded empire.

Notepad, pen, glass of water. Sun outside. The water in the glass lets a sunbeam in—not just a little sunbeam but a big fat one. It spills over the ceiling and suddenly, for a second, looks like an ear. Also an embryo. The door opens. They bring the next one in.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum.

Answer: I used to work in customs on the Kazakhstan border. Soldiers would bring in drugs in their vehicles, and my superior was in cahoots with them. We were supposed to look the other way and write them up properly. I wrote a letter to the FSB. A few days later a truck ran over my daughter on the street. They called me and said this was my first warning.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum.

Answer: I actively supported the opposition candidate in the gubernatorial elections and took part in protest rallies and collected signatures. I was called into the police, and they demanded that I stop coming out with revelations against the provincial leadership. I was beaten up several times by plainclothes police. Attached to my application for asylum I have medical certificates about my broken

jaw and arm and other consequences of the beatings. Now, as you see, I'm disabled and can't work. My wife, who came with me, has stomach cancer.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum.

Answer: I have AIDS. Everyone in town shunned me. Even my wife and children. I got infected when I was in the hospital, during a blood transfusion. I have nothing now: no job, no friends, no home. I'm going to die soon. This is what I decided. If I'm going to croak anyway, why not do it here, with you, in humane conditions? After all, you're not going to kick me out.

Question: Briefly describe the reasons why you are requesting asylum.

Answer: There was a voivode by the name of Dracula in the Orthodox land of Wallachia. One day, the Turkish pasha sent envoys to him, and they demanded that he reject his Orthodox faith and submit to him. While speaking with the voivode, the envoys failed to remove their hats, and when asked why they were insulting the great sovereign in this way, they replied: "Such is the custom of our land, sovereign." Then Dracula ordered his servants to nail the caps to the envoys' heads and sent their bodies back, ordering that the pasha be told that God is one, but customs vary. The enraged pasha came to the Orthodox land with an enormous army and began plundering and killing. The voivode Dracula assembled his entire modest host and attacked the Muslims one night, killed many of them, and fled. In the morning, he organized a review of his surviving soldiers. Anyone wounded in the front had great honor bestowed upon him and the title of knight.

Anyone wounded in the back was ordered impaled, as he said, "You are a wife, not a husband." Learning this, the pasha pulled the remnants of his army back, not daring anymore to attack this land. So the voivode Dracula went on to live on his possessions, and at that time there were many poor, destitute, sick, and feeble people in the Wallachian land. Seeing how many unfortunate people were suffering in his land, he ordered them all to come see him. A multitude without number—unfortunates, cripples, and orphans, hoping for great mercy from him—gathered, and they each began telling him of their misfortunes and pains: one about a lost leg, another about an eye poked out; one about a dead son, another about an unfair trial and an innocent brother thrown in prison. Great was the lamentation, and a wail hung over the entire Wallachian land. Then Dracula ordered them all assembled in a single edifice, built for the occasion, and ordered that they be given fine comestibles and plenty of drink. They ate, drank, and made merry. Then he came to them and asked, "What else do you want?" They all replied, "Only God knows, and you, great sovereign! Do with us as God instructs!" Then he told them, "Do you want me to make you without sorrow in this world, so that you want for nothing, so that you do not bemoan your lost leg or poked out eye, your dead son or unfair trial?" They were hoping for some miracle from him, and they all answered, "We do, sovereign!" Then he ordered the building locked, surrounded with straw, and set on fire. And the fire was great, and all in it burned.

My good Nebuchadnezzasaurus!

I checked my mailbox. Nothing from you.

True, you have other things on your mind besides us. Not that

we are complaining. After all, matters of state significance await you. God forbid you should declare war on anyone or extraterrestrials should attack. An eye for an eye for everyone, for sure. This is no time for letters.

Here everything is the same as of old.

The universe is expanding. The interpreter is interpreting.

You go home, but you can't empty your head of all that transpired during the day. You've brought it all home with you.

You just can't rid yourself of those people and words.

All is the same as ever there. What could be new in the interpreting service? Everything follows a well-beaten path. Everything goes according to the form approved in the upper echelons. Each question according to the established model; likewise each answer. Peter doesn't even waste his voice on the standard greeting; he lets the interpreter read it off the page to the intimidated GS. Which the interpreter does: "Hello! How good you're here! Please, come in, and let us while away this endless day together! Have a seat. You must be weary from your journey. Take a load off your feet. We'll have the samovar put on right away! Bring your boots, your boots over here, closer to the stove! Well, how do you like our best of all possible blank spots on the map, where a man is what he is and says what he keeps silent? You haven't had a look around yet? You'll have time! Maybe you'd like to move over here, away from the window, so you don't catch a draft. You never know. Will you tell me if there's a draft? That's just hunky-dory. Now what were we about? So you see, we get all kinds here, and they're all pretty crumpled, and none too clever, and they have bad teeth—and they lie. They assure us they've mislaid their documents so we won't send them straight back. They tell horrific stories about themselves. No one here tells any that aren't. Complete with details. They keep bringing up their elephantine wrists, into which molten vaseline was supposedly injected. Bogeymen and horror flicks. The things they come out with make you want to sit down and pen detective novels. As if

their mama hadn't taught them to tell the truth when they were children. Sob stories! They wanted to live in paradise! Martyrs we get! But it's not about compassion. It's about clarifying circumstances. In order to keep them out of paradise, we have to ferret out what really happened. But how can you if people become the stories they tell? You just can't. That means it's all very simple. Since you can't clarify the truth, you at least need to clarify the lie. According to our instructions, improbability in statements is grounds for affixing this very stamp. So it's better to think up a legend for yourself and not forget what is most important: the minor details, the trivia. Who would have believed in the resurrection had it not been for the detail about the finger placed in the wound, or about how they ate baked fish together? A stamp's all well and good, but can you really swear that the landscape is as black as you paint it? Take a look around! There go the clouds crawling on their belly. Over there someone has had a bite to eat on the bench and left his newspaper, and now a sparrow's pecking the letters. The neck of a broken bottle glitters on the dam—see?—and the mill wheel's shadow is black. The lilac smells like cheap perfume and believes everything's going to be all right. The stones are alive, too, multiplying by crumbling. You're not even listening. It's like talking to a wall. They only know their own story: they attacked me, tied me up, took me into the forest, beat me up, and left me there. Maybe they were right to beat you up! Did you have debts to pay or not? There you go! Or here there were two guys on the same day; they surrendered together, one supposedly from an orphanage outside Moscow, the other from Chechnya. A week later, the police sent over their passports. They'd hidden their documents in a concrete pipe near the rails where workers came across them. Both were from Lithuania. They'd come for vacation. The hotel was too expensive, so here they had a roof over their head and three squares a day. Results of bone analysis showed they were way past sixteen. Stamp. Stamp. Or here's a family surrendering: papa, mama, and a daughter of Zion. They assure us they'd fled

their Anatevka; they couldn't take the villagers' persecution anymore. Those weren't the native inhabitants, they said, those were real fascists! May God save the Jews, and if He can't, then at least let Him save the goyim! They started telling stories about how the Christians there beat them. The husband and wife had their front teeth knocked out, and their daughter—she wasn't even twelve yet—was raped. As he was supposed to, Peter questioned each one separately. The papa and mama said approximately the same thing, as if from a memorized text: threats through the mail, nighttime phone calls, attacks at their front door, et cetera. Then they asked the girl in. Through the open door, you could see her clinging to her mama. She didn't want to, but her mama told her, "Go on, don't be afraid!" The girl went in and sat on the edge of her chair. Peter offered her chocolate for courage. He keeps chocolates in his right-hand desk drawer for just such occasions. This is not provided for by the instructions, but who would forbid it? Now Peter asked her whether her family was religious, and she answered, 'Honest to God! We go to church all the time.' And for greater proof, she crossed herself. She got it all mixed up, she was so frightened. Her dad was probably a failed merchant whose deals with his villager partners had gone south. They'd taken a standard story for surrendering, a sure thing. Who would dare not take pity on Jews? They thought they'd get away with it. After all, you can't simulate missing teeth, and according to a medical examination, the child's rape really had taken place. Stamp. You see how people sign the interrogation transcript! One, nodding obediently, as if to say, we are ignorant people, we'll sign what you say to sign; another checks even the spelling of geographical names. A third, who arrived with a stack of certificates from all his houses of sorrow, bonesetters, and lockups and assured us that he didn't believe anyone in the world anymore, demanded even a written translation of the interrogation transcript—because an oral one wasn't good enough, don't you know, and he wasn't about to put his signature on who knew what, on principle. Peter gave him a stamp

straight away. And the guy started protesting then and there. We had to whistle for the guard. They threatened him with a halberd. Even in our neighborly country a guy like that will get to the bonesetters before too long. And a fourth up and asks us to put in the transcript that it's nice here with us, not too cold and not too hot, whereas they have four seasons: winter, winter, winter, and winter. We know you! You surrender as martyrs of winter and then you steal! So many times it's happened. First we introduce ourselves at the interview—hello-hello—and then the inevitable meeting at the police when they catch him for stealing—after all, the interpreter moonlights for the police, too—ah, old friends! It's been ages! And the creepy stories start up again. He says he definitely didn't bite the Migro mart manager at the exit by the cashier, and if he did, then it was only because the other tried to strangle him. So let's get back to our sheep. Take a look at yourself! You've lived to have gray hair and you're still on the run! Where's your passport? You don't know? But we do: at the train station's left luggage. Or the refugee shelter with your homeboy who surrendered before. We're going to write you up, you'll get an official travel pass under an invented name, and once you're out, you'll go straight for your documents. What? You won't? Then you'll have all your needs provided for—and onward: steal and sell the stolen goods for cheap. No matter his grief, he's still a thief. Neither cardsharp nor cheat, but a journeyman of the night, who is he? Hungry, even a bishop would steal. And you can save your breath about working! Who needs people like you? There are plenty of takers here as is. Many are called, darky, but few are chosen. What you rob from our stores here, you sell in your stalls there. That's the full extent of your working. So what if everything's hooked up to an alarm! Don't you know how to make bags? It's very simple. You take aluminum foil and glue it to the inside, and it's like a reflective sack and no alarm goes off. Take out whatever you want. Then send it on. How? By mail even. You write it's a gift, say, used items, all kinds of rubbish. The main thing here is the return address. Find

someone nice and respectable in the phone book. Even better, some philanthropic organization. No one's going to pick on you then. Get it? What do you mean you're not up to it? The eyes are afraid but the hands obey! You aren't the first, and you won't be the last! So tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! And don't forget that no one has believed your blood-curdling stories for a long time. After all, life also consists of love and beauty, and because I sleep and my heart keeps vigil, there, the voice of my beloved knocks—Open up, sister mine, my beloved, my darling, my pure!—because my head is covered with dew and my curls with the damp of night. Have you understood your rights and responsibilities and that no one gets into paradise anyway?" GS: "Yes." Peter, taking the greeting text from the interpreter: "Any questions?" GS: "Those speaking may be fictitious, but what they say is real. Truth lies only where it is concealed. Fine, the people aren't real but the stories, oh, the stories are! It's just that they raped someone else at that orphanage, not fat-lips. And the guy from Lithuania heard the story about the brother who burned up and the murdered mother from someone else. What difference does it make who it happened to? It's always a sure thing. The people here are irrelevant. It's the stories that can be authentic or not. You just need to tell an authentic story. Just the way it happened. And not invent anything. We are what we say. A freshly planed destiny is packed with people no one needs, like an ark; all the rest is the floodgates of heaven. We become what gets written in the transcript. The words. You have to understand. The divine idea of the river is the river itself." Peter: "Then let's get down to it." And we were off: question-answer, question-answer. And snowflakes coming through the window pane. How could that be? It was just summer, and the snow's already begun? I can see the courtyard out the window. Some African there is shoveling snow from the path with a big iron shovel under a policeman's watchful eye. The thin iron scrapes the asphalt, just like in Moscow. Look, they've brought in this morning's second set of frozen GSs for interviews. They're

wrapped up in jackets and scarves, mainly Africans and Asians, they're stamping over the fresh-fallen snow, and someone's child, a little Arab or Kurd, or maybe an Iranian—who can tell those five year olds apart?—keeps trying to scoop up a handful and make a snowball while his mother clucks at him, dragging him by the arm. Question-answer, question-answer. Then a break and coffee from a plastic cup. In another window, another courtyard, more snow, and the little Indians are having a snowball fight. But weren't these same little Indians just having a snowball fight, or has a year flown by? And once again question-answer, question-answer. It's like talking to yourself. You ask yourself the questions. And answer them.

Before going to sleep, the interpreter tries to read in order to clear his head. Before he turns off the light and puts a pillow over his ear, he would also like to speed off to the other end of the empire and travel with Cyrus through the desert, keeping the Euphrates on his right, in five crossings of thirty-five parasangs. The land there is a plain, as flat as the sea, and grown over in wormwood. The plants you encounter—the bushes and reeds—all give a marvelous scent, like incense. There is not a single tree, but the animals are quite varied: you encounter wild asses and large ostriches. You come across mouflons and gazelles, too. Often horsemen are chasing these animals. The asses, when they're being chased, run ahead and then stop—they run much faster than horses. When the horses get close, they take off again, and there is no reaching them unless the horsemen are in different places and hunt in turn. The meat of the asses is like venison, but tenderer. No one has ever caught a single ostrich, and the horsemen who chase after them quickly give up. The ostrich runs off and breaks away, using both its legs and its wings, raised like sails, during its flight.

You close the book and try to fall asleep, but your head again hears question-answer, question-answer. Again plainclothes policemen trying to break down a door, bursting into an apartment,

turning everything upside down, punching you in the kidneys, and breaking your arm or rib. But Peter asks, When you were a child, did you and your parents ever take the *Rossiya* across the Black Sea and in the most unexpected places—for instance, in the overhead fans—suddenly notice “Adolf Hitler” in embossed Gothic letters? Answer: Yes, I did. Question: Your son, when visitors came over, did he crawl under the table out of boredom and start removing everyone’s slippers, and did their feet feel around blindly over the parquet? Answer: Yes, he did. Question: Your mother, when she was buried, they put a slip of paper with a prayer on her forehead, and all of a sudden you thought, Who is going to read that and when? Answer: Yes, I did. Question: Is the River Styx in Perm? Did it freeze overnight? Did you toss a stick that took a hop on the ice, and did the ice boom, hollowly, lightly? Answer: Yes, it did. Question: Where did that girl swim to at night, one arm forward, under the pillow, the other back, palm up, and you so wanted to kiss that palm but you were afraid to wake her up?

In the wee hours the interpreter woke up bathed in sweat and with a pounding heart: he had dreamed of Galina Petrovna—except the boys all called her Galpetra, out of sheer meanness—and it had all come back to him—the lesson, the blackboard—as if all these decades lived had never been. He lay there looking at their brightening ceiling and returned to himself, clutching at his heart.

Why be afraid of her now?

And what exactly was in your dream—you forget right away and are left with just your schoolboy fear.

It’s a nasty feeling, too. You never know what empire you’re going to wake up in or who as.

The interpreter had switched off the computer but now he turned it back on to write down how he’d tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep, and how he’d remembered Galina Petrovna leading us

on a field trip to Ostankino, to the Museum of Serf Art. It was still September, but the first snow had fallen, and the Apollo Belvedere was standing in the middle of a circular, snow-covered lawn. We were firing snowballs at him. Everyone wanted to hit where the leaf was, but no one could, and then Galpetra shouted at us and we started our field trip to the museum. I remember the echo in the cold dark rooms hung with time-blackened pictures. Reflections from the windows flowed over the waxed parquet like ice floes. We glided as if we were on a skating rink, in the oversized felt slippers we put on directly over our boots, and we stepped on each other’s heels, so whoever was walking ahead of you would fall. Galpetra hissed at us and doled out clips to the back of the head. I see her as if it were today, the dark mustache at the edges of her mouth, in her violet wool suit, white knit mohair cap, and winter boots with the zipper half down so that her feet wouldn’t get too funky, with museum slippers that resembled Lapp snowshoes over them. From the guide’s stories I remember that if a serf ballerina danced badly in the theater, then her skirt was ripped off and she was thrashed in the stables. Doubtless I remembered it because of that: her skirt was ripped off. I also remember how they did thunder. If they needed thunder during the play, they would sprinkle peas down the top of a huge wooden pipe. This attraction was part of the excursion, and someone invisible at the top sprinkled a packet of peas into the pipe. But I remember the field trip mainly because someone whispered to me that our Galpetra was pregnant. This seemed so impossible to me at the time, so unimaginable, that our ageless, mustachioed teacher could get pregnant. After all, for that to happen, what happened between a man and woman—a woman, not our Galpetra!—would have to happen. I looked closely at the stomach of the old maid, who fought so fervently in school against mascara and eye shadow, and noticed nothing. Galpetra was just as fat as ever. I didn’t want, simply couldn’t, believe it. After all, there’s no such thing as immaculate conception, but I was convinced by these words: “The whole school

already knows she's going on maternity leave." So we were standing there listening to peas being transformed into peals of distant thunder, while something inexplicable was growing inside Galpetra, and out the window, through the snowfall, you could see the Ostankino television center, and the Apollo Belvedere was walking toward it through the snow without leaving tracks.

This Tungus morning, the interpreter chanced to wake up as an interpreter in a one-room apartment across from the cemetery. Maybe that was why the rent was cheap. Green as green could be. Finely drawn, fizzy, feathery. And since morning, everywhere, not only in the next apartment, the radio reported the murders and robberies of the previous night in a brisk voice. You didn't notice the crematorium right away. It looked like someone's villa on the hillside. And there was never smoke, although they operated indefatigably, as everyone here was expected to. It was all in the filters. They were installed in the chimney to keep from sullyng the rain.

I've already written about the squirrel running along the fence.

For a long time my neighbors were nowhere to be seen. Just their linen. They did their laundry in the basement, where there were several washing machines. The machines were almost always in use, and laundered socks, old ladies' darned stockings, and prewar drawers awaited their bodies on lines in the drying rooms.

Until what war?

The interpreter thought there was something strange about this building when he came here the year before—no, it was a year and a half now. At first, he didn't realize that something was wrong with this huge building, where it was always quiet. He only noticed that he never heard children's voices. Then he noticed that there were only one-room apartments here and only old people lived in them. They seemed like decrepit walking stockings and socks.

The interpreter got a little apartment on the first floor, with a door that let out on the lawn, where there was always something

lying on the ground. Right now the grass was stirring under the drops, and a tube of Colgate was getting wet under his window.

He could hear but not see his neighbors to the left and right. The one on the left kept whistling to his key so it would whistle back. The one on the right was talkative. He chirped to himself like a bird. He went around at night in long johns and a T-shirt, winter and summer. One day the interpreter was getting home very late, around two in the morning, and his neighbor was sweeping the path.

The toothpaste was from the seventh floor. In the first few days after he moved in, various items started falling on the lawn right in front of his window—but it wasn't garbage. One time a telephone fell, then sets of sheets, then a radio, food items, ladles, openers, office supplies, different notepads, a box of staples, envelopes. Not every day. Sometimes nothing would fly for a week and then you look—scissors. The interpreter collected it all in black garbage bags, and anything useful he simply pocketed. If it fell from the sky, it was lost. In his desk drawer lay those heaven-sent pencils, glue, and scissors. The interpreter simply could not understand who was throwing all this or why. Then one windy day the lawn was covered in dropped sheets of white paper, as if fall had come to a paper tree. They turned out to be ballots. After all, they had referendums here at the drop of a hat. And indicated on these ballots were a name and address. Where: to the best of all possible worlds, to whom: Frau Eggli. The interpreter went out to look at the list of residents' names and everything fell into place. Frau Eggli lived directly above him on the seventh floor. He went upstairs and rang her doorbell. Who knew, there could just have been a draft and all her papers were blown off her windowsill. He just wanted to return them. No one opened for a long time. The interpreter was about to go away when he heard a shuffling inside. Finally the door cracked open. First his nose was struck by the smell, but then in the darkness the interpreter made out an eight-hundred-year-old lady. He was actually amazed

that so much smell could come from such a wizened creature. He apologized and started explaining about the ballots, that they had fallen, he said, and he had brought them up. She was silent. He asked, checking the plaque by her doorbell one more time, “Sie sind ja Frau Eggli, oder?”³ She mumbled, “Nein, das bin i nöd!”⁴ and she slammed the door. No is no. Maybe she was switched at birth. And from time to time something fell from above.

Before this the interpreter had lived in another building, and not alone, with his wife and son. And it came to pass that his wife was now someone else’s wife. This can happen in our empire, and in every other one, too. It’s nothing special.

Over the telephone the interpreter asked his son each time, “How’re you doing?”

And he always answered, “Fine.”

For Christmas, when the interpreter called to find out whether he liked the present he’d sent, a young magician’s set, his son said, “Everyone else only gets presents from one papa, but I get them from two! Isn’t that great?”

“Yes, it is,” the interpreter replied.

His son also sent him amusing letters from time to time with pictures included. One time he invented his own country and drew a map.

The interpreter pinned the map to his wall.

Question: So you say you’re searching for a haven for your weary, wounded soul, which is exhausted from the humiliations and trials, from boors and poverty, from scoundrels and fools, and that everywhere you go you’re threatened by the impending danger of becoming evil’s toy and victim, as if an inescapable curse lay on your line, and on

3. Aren’t you Mrs. Eggli? (*Ger.*)

4. No, that’s not me! (*Swiss Ger.*)

everyone else, too, and how your grandmothers and grandfathers suffered, and how the current generation is suffering, too, and how the unborn are going to suffer to the seventh generation, and possibly even beyond. As substantial proofs you’ve shown your ticket from Romanshorn to Kreuzlingen, punched by the sleep-deprived conductor, a page torn from a school notebook with doodlings, and your body worn to holes. One thing at a time, though. You earned your living—after all, you have a family and an old mother on your neck, too, and an unmarried sister—by working as a bodyguard for a high-flying journalist, a smart guy, really wicked, who anchored a killer TV show that mortals adored because it brought them hope and a smidgeon of light to their hovels and palaces. God knows how, but said journalist got his hands on materials about the source of evil. Something to do with a needle. A needle hidden in an egg, that was in a drake, that was in a hare, that was in something else, and all of it in turn was stuffed into a briefcase. The fearless journalist planned to take out the contents publicly, live on the air, break off the needle’s tip, and thus destroy evil. Not that the powerful of this world (evil, after all, always thinks it’s good, and good, vice versa, evil) were asleep at the wheel. The daredevil read the anonymous threats he’d received out loud, in front of everyone, and immediately tore them to shreds, demonstrating his contempt for his invisible but omnipresent enemies. Then one day, in a wet snowfall, you said goodbye to him for the day, he got into his snow-covered car with his new wife—he’d divorced half a year before wipers swept aside this slushy mess—and you thought that you were seeing him for the last time. Actually, no one ever gave a rat’s ass what you thought. They

sat there, and while the car was warming up, they wanted to live a long and happy life and die on the exact same day at the exact same minute. She said, “To hell with the truth. There is no truth, Slavik, my beloved. I’m afraid for you and for me. Please, I beg of you, don’t do this!” Before he could answer her, the car blew up. The investigation began working on the mistake theory: the bomb had been planted in the wrong automobile, and the agents studied data on the owners of all snow-whitened BMWs who had left their cars by Ostankino that slushy day, where living pyramids of snowflakes rose in parking places under every streetlight. They even searched for the briefcase with the truth, but they didn’t find it. The deceased’s former spouse, insulted and crushed in her feminine nature, had tried to forget the man who had betrayed her love while he had still been alive, but from time to time she called him and just listened. Oh, how alike all lonely discarded women are, stifling their rage as they breathe heavily into the receiver! For fear of going mad, she went to see a psychotherapist and sobbed for two hours straight. They’d lived together for years, after all. Waiting for her to finish, the psychotherapist, who had a glass eye, which he often covered with his hand, suggested she picture her past happy life as a video she’d seen and said she needed to relax, close her eyes, view the tape once more quickly, at fast-forward, so that everyone looked funny mincing along and kissing as if they were pecking each other with their nose and made love with the briskness of hamsters, and then pull the tape out of the player and throw it down the rubbish chute. “Our building doesn’t have a rubbish chute,” the woman replied. Finally, when she learned what had happened, she commenced to bellowing, but in a completely

different way. Now she could allow herself to think about how he’d loved her, remember the good, and take pleasure in those memories. Now these were god-sent tears that washed her soul and brought relief. After all, when he’d been alive, if she’d thought of him at all, she thought of him only in the past tense, as if he’d died. Now that he had, and for real, she didn’t have to pretend anymore. One day, returning to her empty apartment, she sensed that someone had been in the room in her absence. Nothing was out of place, but she was gripped by a strange burning sensation. Her feet ached from exhaustion, she lay down and suddenly smelled something on her pillow—his cologne. So he’d come. That made sense. The soul of a murdered man is reluctant to quit this world because the woman who loves him is still there and she needs his protection. We so want to believe that the people we care about but who have quit this life are not lost to us forever, that they’re nearby and in a difficult moment can come to our aid. Much has been written about the relativity of death, when all of a sudden it becomes clear that the dead man is alive—as is everyone ever killed or dead. After all, the grass’s roots live on, oblivious to the fact that someone has already eaten it. Another time, coming home she saw in her grandmother’s half-blind mirror, which was covered with old-age spots, a sweeping inscription in red lipstick done in his hand. The deceased said that his murderer was—you. That made sense, too, basically. Opportunity knocked. No surprise the bodyguard was hired for the murder. That’s obviously the simpler, surer way. But you ended up between a rock and a hard place. It’s hard to agree but not so easy to refuse. Say what you like, but you came in handy. Sure, the dead can be wrong, too,

but you get the picture. Now the investigation took a new turn, and you were charged with the journalist's murder. You had to go into hiding. The story took on a life of its own, and now, to clear yourself, you had to find the real murderer, or even better, the vanished truth. It was getting to be a regular detective novel. Meanwhile, the dead man's ex-wife went to see a clairvoyant, who had just finished with a woman who'd asked her to lift a curse from her family. In a single year she'd had her husband die an untimely death, her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter perished in an auto wreck, her grandson, now an orphan, had been seriously ill since birth, and there'd also been a fire in her apartment. The seer's room smelled of smoked tar, and outside, a beetle's gnawed writings were hidden in an old tree, under the bark, writings describing his beetle-ish life that no one would ever read. The clairvoyant took the agreed-upon fee in an envelope and counted the money, and when she asked how to get in touch with her husband, who was both gone and there at the same time, gave her the address of an Internet chat room where he would come to her online at first star light. At the appointed time, there was a single visitor to the chat room. Him. She kept jabbing her finger. All she wanted to know was: "My beloved, why did you leave me?" He answered her about some locker number in left luggage at the Belorussky train station, but she went on and on: "I just want to know. Why?" Let us leave them to themselves, though, and take a look at what was happening at that time with you. You couldn't go home, where an ambush was doubtless lying in wait. You were afraid they might do something to your wife and son, although the child, who wasn't yours, was already grown, but for

love and plot development that doesn't matter. So you went to see your army friend who never got his fill of toy soldiers as a kid and had assembled a tin panorama of the Battle of Waterloo. Army friendship, you decided, was sacred. People who were once together and fairly close, meeting after many years, seek out that lost intimacy, although they've become completely different people. You might compare it to the water that was in a vase and later turned into steam or rain. You told him your story while your friend smoked, and the smoke streams from his nostrils struck his plate of macaroni. He realized it was a losing proposition and that he might have to die helping you, but this was exactly what got him so stirred up. Dostoevsky, I think it was, said that sacrificing your life might be the easiest sacrifice of all. The next day your friend put on his striped vest and went to see the journalist's former wife, in order to make contact, through her, with the dead man's spirit and tease out the secret of the missing briefcase. Hearing shots, workers at the laundry across the street called the police, but the on-duty squad got stuck in traffic and so arrived only when rush hour was over, and they detained the noble daredevil after surreptitiously planting silver spoons in his pocket during a desperate struggle, although he tried to vindicate himself, saying he had found the woman's dead body on the bed in the room, sniffing the pillow. She was dead—shot through the heart. He had rushed to her to see whether he could bring her around, and that was how her blood ended up on him. That was when he took the revolver out of her hand. It had been put there by someone to make it look like suicide, and the gun went off, shooting her in the leg, because the safety was off, and your friend didn't know how to use a

firearm. This was by way of explaining her blood on him, the powder residue, and his fingerprints on the gun. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that your faithful comrade was able to read on the screen of the computer, which had been left on, and tell you over the phone, before his arrest, the code and locker number at the train station, where you finally got the ill-starred case. The arrest of an utterly innocent man, who got into trouble because of you, merely lent the action a certain tension and drama. Now you were walking down the street with the evil in the case and thinking about what you should do. Everyone turned around at the sound of glass clinking and grinding—it was an old woman pulling a sled over the asphalt with a bassinet full of empty bottles. On the square the young mamas with strollers were discussing the best way to wean, and one was telling how her mother, when she was breastfeeding her younger child, rubbed her nipples with mustard, and her son, who had already begun to talk, squirmed and said, “Titty poo-poo!” If the child nurses for a long time, he'll be late learning to talk and won't enunciate well. The pensioner who had been looking out the window at them went into the kitchen, tore off the calendar page, and sighed: tomorrow Pushkin would be killed. By midday the snow had become mealy, spongy, and the drifts had been eaten away as if by locusts, and under the elderberry the pimply crust had melted around the edges. Near the restaurant entrance an African in livery did a little jig, rejoicing at the sun and flashing his gold buttons; he'd probably come here at one time to study. In the kindergarten, when the children sat on the potties, the nanny opened the window to increase colds and reduce attendance. A crooked poster in the candy shop

window: “You were slime yesterday, you'll be ashes tomorrow.” Lion cubs fed dog frolicked in the zoo. At the beauty salon the hairdresser hiccuped after dinner, thinking about how she would practice her guitar again that evening—she'd put foam rubber under the strings to dampen the chords. Across the street, at the art school, a life model was posing with a sock on his phallus; he didn't have the special little lace-up pouch. The cross on the church's crown was secured with chains, so it wouldn't fly away. The service was over, and women in scarves had roped off the passage to the altar and were washing the trampled floor and grumbling. The beggar on the parvis knew it was bad to give to anyone who was bald, so he always wore a cap. At the home for disabled children, the instructor was shaking out the mattresses in the girls' bedroom, digging around in the beds, and rummaging in the cubbies in search of contraband mascara, but the cherished box was hanging out the window, wound round by string. In the market they were selling half-sours in aquariums. An unshaven native of the Caucasus was wiping his apples with a dirty rag. At school they were covering Gogol. The young teacher was explaining that the nose's flight was a flight from death, and his return was a return to the natural order of life and death. Lovers were taking a bus to go conceive a child. They were pressed up close in the crush, doing a little jig on the back platform along with all the other passengers. Later, at home, coming to a stand-still with the fragrant coffee grinder in her hands, she would think, “Lord, how simple it is to be happy!” while he opened a can of sardines, winding the lid around the key as if he were winding the world up like a clock. And it was someone else who had to unload the sides of beef

hanging on hooks and sparking rime in the refrigerator car, where the frost fogged and a hazy, shining rim flickered around the light bulb. No one in town knew the secret anymore of the cavalry guard's white leg chamois—you had to put them on wet and dry them on your naked body. In despair, you went to a well-known philanthropist and human rights activist—let's call him Wynd—signed up for an appointment, and sat in the waiting room, drumming your fingers on the case's artificial leather. Wynd was the only person in the whole windy world who could help you get the truth out and punish the evil that was triumphing outside. After all, someone had to break off the tip of evil on a live broadcast! Lots of people probably thought that way because the waiting room was filled with refugees from Central Asia wearing torn and faded robes. It was an old mansion that a certain oil bank had coveted for a long time. The ceilings were decorated with antique molding, and no one was surprised anymore that Apollo, the god of the arts, had killed all Niobe's children one after the other and then turned her to stone, thereby putting an end to the mother's sufferings. But you waited in vain. Wynd had mysteriously vanished from his office, and his body was found in the neighbor's garden, hanging from a branch. There you have it, the mystery of the closed room so beloved by all. So what if the press came out with wimpy conjectures about mysticism and unknown otherworldly forces? It all turned out to be very simple. Three tramps, former tank crew, outraged at the realm's humiliation, had decided to take their revenge on liberals. They were remembered by specific traits: their rotten teeth shone in the darkness. They also liked to recall how piles of bananas were dumped on Leningrad in early

1938. And one of them said that if he knew there was no death, that you didn't die but simply "shifted" to some other life, that is, you died but not really, for pretend, then all this was unworthy. You had to die with dignity, like a man, in earnest, knowing that death existed. But here's what happened. One fired an old dueling pistol as he was walking down the street after noticing Wynd standing there by the open window, thinking, for some reason, about Turgenev's boots, which he had seen years ago in a museum. The boots had stood behind glass, dried up and dead, and he could not believe they had ever been alive and smelled of feet and leather and that after the hunt, oats had been sprinkled in them to draw out the damp, and they had been carried outdoors to air out and then smeared with tar. At the shot Wynd looked out. The second tank tramp dropped a noose over him from the upper floor, jerked the old man up, and then flung him into the other window which looked out on the park, which was saturated with ripe evening light, and signed, like a verdict, with the flourish of a swift. The third accomplice hooked him on to a tree. It grew dark quickly. You headed for the train to Podlipki, where your aging mama and your sister, a literature teacher, lived. At the station they kept announcing over the loudspeaker that life was a drawn bow and death was the flight of the released arrow. On the train—heated, stuffy, and sweaty—you hugged the briefcase and imagined your mama and sister right then sitting at the table, drinking tea, eating pancakes with pot cheese, and watching the news. They had just shown a bus with hostages in Nazran flying into the air and the human bits soaring, skillfully shot in slow motion, like scraps of red snow. The whole train was reading detective novels. Which

was understandable. A detective novel assumes that before the crime was committed, before the first corpse showed up, there was a primordial harmony in the world. Then this was violated and the detective not only found the murderer but also restored order to the world. This was the ancient function of the cultural hero. He waded through the uncertainty. Yet it was also clear where good was and where evil, because good always won out and there was no getting it wrong. If it won out, that meant it was good. Basically they were reading because it was scary to squeak through life like a mosquito, somewhere in the darkness, unseen and unheard. A detective novel was the same kind of horror as in the newspapers, the only difference being that it ended well. It simply couldn't end any other way. First came the sufferings, fears, worries, tears, and losses, and in the end it was all behind you. Like in the fairy tale : a beast from the netherworld seizes the island and rules the people, who are imperfectly drawn, imperfectly written. He gnaws off their heads. They're afraid but alive. Somehow they have to live. Then a hero shows up, brimming with valor and oriental wisdom, and he gives the beast a boot in the balls. As to newspapers, better not to open them at all. It's not the news, it's a report of especially dangerous crimes that chill the soul and blow on the weathervane of public opinion: according to the latest surveys, everyone is again demanding the introduction of, first, public executions for the rape of their daughters and sons and, second, Sharia law, in order to chop off thieves' hands: the next time they get the urge to steal something, they won't have anything to do it with. Sitting next to you was an ugly young woman with hair growing everywhere it shouldn't, dying at night for want of love, and

reading about a Jewish sect called the Sadducees. Squinting, you ran your eyes over the lines, which said that the Sadducees asserted that in the future there would be neither eternal bliss for the righteous nor eternal torment for the impious. They rejected the existence of angels and evil spirits, as well as the future resurrection of the dead. "I guess that means we're Sadducees," you sighed. The commuter train was pulling into Podlipki. Out the window, half of a dog some little boys had tied to the rails flashed by on the embankment. You could take a bus from the station, but you decided to proceed on foot and get a little air. As you approached the five-story apartment building, you greeted the babushkas on the bench and thought, You're about to get killed, and they're going to be discussing the funeral details, just like you'd expect—what kind of coffin and how loudly the widow wept. You walked through the front door, and instead of dashing up the stairs as usual, to keep from breathing in the smells seeping from the corners, you began climbing the stairs slowly, cautiously, listening closely, peering into the darkness, and crushing the empty syringes. And you stopped. Upstairs, on the next flight, someone was standing there and talking quietly, and when you stopped, the conversation broke off. The clank of a jerked bolt. You realized this was for you, and at this the description of nature began. It was a quiet summer morning. Though the sun had risen fairly high in the clear sky, the fields still glittered with dew. A fragrant freshness blew in from the recently awakened valleys, and in the forest, still damp and noiseless, the early birds were singing their cheery songs. In the millpond, sky-striders ran over the clouds' reflections. A storm-battered aspen, the color of slate. A glassy halo around a

dragonfly stuck to a sunbeam. Ticks swarming in the oak's crown. An elm turned bronze. The wind parting the spruce's hair. According to Dante, the forest was made of sinners turned into trees. The dried meadow crunched underfoot. Your ears were blocked by the squawk of grasshoppers. The stream was creeping along, infantry-fashion, and dragging the algae by the hair. It never occurs to anyone to name the sky, although it too, like the oceans, has its straits and seas, trenches and sand-bars. The bolt's clank turned out to be the sound of a tossed empty beer can. The conversation on the staircase resumed, and someone picked up his story about his dog with the human eyes. The dog and its owner were on the same wavelength. The dog seemed like a person to him, except with fur and paws. But when the dog had puppies, something happened to it. One time he came home and saw the dog had bitten off its puppies' heads. Something in nature was out of kilter. This couldn't, shouldn't be. He was forced to shoot the dog. "Made it through that one." You heaved a sigh of relief and climbed upstairs. You opened the door with your key and took a step back at the spectacle that unfolded before you, gripped by horror and consternation. As the investigation later established, since three in the morning the peaceful sleep of the block's inhabitants had been disturbed by terrific shrieks, but frightened by the times, which were evil and brigandish, the neighbors had kept mum. The apartment was in the wildest disorder—the furniture broken and thrown about in all directions. On a chair lay a razor, smeared with blood. On the hearth were two or three long and thick tresses of grey human hair, also dabbled in blood, and seeming to have been pulled out by the roots. Upon the floor were found four

Napoleons, a topaz earring, and two bags, containing the old jubilee rubles, which all the vending machines here accept for the five-franc William Tell. By the window was a smashed three-liter jar of mash made from mushrooms that had dried and shriveled. Of your mother and sister no traces were seen; but an unusual quantity of soot being observed in the fire-place, a search was made in the chimney, and (horrible to relate!) the corpse of the daughter, head downward, was dragged therefrom, it having been thus forced up the narrow aperture for a considerable distance. The body was quite warm. Upon examining it, many excoriations were perceived, no doubt occasioned by the violence with which it had been thrust up and disengaged. Upon the face were many severe scratches, and, upon the throat, dark bruises, and deep indentations of finger nails, as if the deceased had been throttled to death. Most interesting, moreover, was that your sister was discovered in a room locked from the inside, and the windows were latched shut. The mystery of the closed room again! Let's see how you squirm out of it this time. After a thorough investigation of every portion of the house, without further discovery, the party made its way into a small paved yard in the rear of the building, where the garbage that rotted slightly spread a foul smell when it thawed, lay the corpse of the old lady, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off. The body, as well as the head, was fearfully mutilated—the former so much so as scarcely to retain any semblance of humanity. Traces had been left everywhere in the room: the uneaten remains of cheese blinchiks, which the murderers had tasted, which meant they had left saliva, lipstick-stained butts, a burned match with a charred tip in the ashtray,

glasses with fingerprints, tracks from a size forty-five right boot, which led to thoughts of the scoundrels' one-leggedness, but the investigators did not find any evidence or clues, and the press release read at the briefing asserted that the murderer was a gigantic Ourang-Outang, which climbed out the window—which closed of its own accord when the beast fled. I am skipping ahead in the interest of brevity—after all it's mealtime soon, and my stomach is growling already—but we are only at the very beginning, which is why the description of the murders of people about whom we know virtually nothing does not give rise to any particular grief, anger, or burning protest. We'll all be goggle-eyed when we turn our toes up, so I'm skipping, I repeat, the further misadventures of the briefcase, the encoded letter, the twins alike as two drops of water, the secret passages, and the window broken from the outside, if the shards are inside, and from the inside if out, and although the dog that did not bark when it should have leads you to think that it knew the murderer, we will move on to your closing statements, the final chase, where the rather unsophisticated storyline reaches its apogee. You were running with the case that all the fuss was about, through a field, rosy buckwheat, blue flax, but right there you got confused and later made corrections to the transcript, you allegedly remembered the dusty road through the strawberry field. After the hot day it smelled keenly of berries. They were in hot pursuit. On the one hand, law enforcement agencies; on the other, the Mafia, which as you realized, were one and the same, and there before you was a river filled with reflections from above, but with time on the inside, filling it to the brim. An up-turned stump went into the water up to its waist and let

a cabbage white butterfly perch on its proffered elbow. Behind the bushes, a boy was fishing. He cast his hook, the long rod's flexing tip ripping the air. The bait smacked the river and circles rippled through time. A ping-pong ball bounced, surfacing gradually, deliberately. Somewhere downstream you could hear a wolf howling, a goat bleating, an oarlock creaking. There were mosquito thickets by the shore. A spider was catching a chill in its net and laying it up for the fall. You touched the spider with your finger, and it climbed skyward over its web. Majestic clouds had come to a halt above the river, where summer people were dragging sacks of cabbages from the field, having taken in with their mother's milk the saying: You're only a thief if you get caught. Someone had rigged a piano lid for a fence. A hose was coiled in its shadow, heavy from the water it held. There was a couple in the sand on the opposite shore. From far away you couldn't tell what was going on there, a kiss or artificial respiration, but there was no time to ponder that because the spetsnaz was behind and you could hear them shouting, "The Lord knows where he leads us, but we shall find out at the end of our journey!" The leather throats were chanting: "It's not so terrible for life to end, but if life doesn't start up again, that's bad!" You removed your boots to make the swimming easier, lowered your foot into the black water, and it went immediately up to your knee. Stalks crept slickly under your soles, bubbles took off and burst, and it stank of decay. You stepped on your other foot—and a little white ball started rocking on the circles and hopping just as it reached you. You jumped in and started swimming, but the shore, that had seemed just a couple of strokes away, started playing keep-away with you. You swam for a long time, but it

was still those same couple of strokes away. You were nearly to your breaking point because you had to stroke with one hand while the case was dragging you to the bottom. Floundering, you swallowed a mouthful of water and a watery ceiling closed overhead. You opened your eyes: a yellow wall with a sprig of algae and the sun's circle through the radiant turbidity. You struggled until you suddenly felt an incredible lightness. You were care-free, delighted. All of a sudden you thought, "Why was I struggling if this is so easy and marvelous!" You were saved by Captain Nemo in his *Nautilus* and put to shore at Romanshorn. There you bought this ticket here and boarded the train for Kreuzlingen. Seating yourself by the window so you'd have a view of Lake Bodensee, you started checking how much money there was in your wallet, and you came across your son's drawing, the very same doodle he'd drawn for your birthday, and you had carried that scrap around with you ever since, and out the window stretched bare trees leaning to the right, like letters written in a woman's hand, and you realized that this was your wife writing you a letter saying she loved you and was waiting for you. You fell asleep, but then you had to get off. You jumped out on the platform and suddenly realized you'd left your briefcase, as well as all the documents attesting to your identity, but it was too late. The train was gone. That's the straight goods?

Answer: Yes. I think so. I don't know. Maybe I got something mixed up. You have to forgive me, I'm upset.

Question: Just calm down. It's all behind you now. Do you want some water? I realize you're having a hard time of it right now.

Answer: Thank you! Word of honor, I tried to tell you everything the way it was, and you see what came of it.

Question: It's nothing terrible. Everyone tells his story the best he can.

Answer: I didn't make anything up. That's how it all was. Do you believe me?

Question: It makes no difference whether I do or don't.

Answer: Maybe you thought it was over the top, well, the part about the fireplace or the clouds and the stolen cabbages, but that's all how it was, the way I told it, why should I make anything up?

Question: Don't take it so hard! People tell all kinds of stories here. It's all fine. And the fact that it sounds like a detective novel, well, you yourself said you just hope it all ends well. That's all there is to it.

Answer: Yes, that's all there is to it. Exactly. You want so badly for it all to end well. Tell me, will it?

Question: Listen, you're a grown man. You're graying at the temples. You've lived some. Do you really not understand that what you told me is ultimately irrelevant to our decision?

Answer: Irrelevant how? Why? What is relevant then?

Question: Well, it's all irrelevant. What difference does it make who dragged a cabbage from the field or where the case went missing? It just did. You don't really believe, in fact, in the drake, the hare, and some rusty pin, do you?

Answer: No, of course not.

Question: There, you see?

Answer: But what is relevant?

Question: Tell me, the part about the doodle and the trees on the shore like cursive handwriting, is that true?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Do you love her?

Answer: What, is this necessary for your report?

Question: What naïve people they are when it comes right down to it! They arrive thinking someone needs them. Here they

are pushing and swarming so, you can't question them all. And who needs you? The main thing is they believe in this foolishness. One, kind of like you, he even looks a little like you, gray hair, shabby, scruffy, with the same faded, washed out eyes, tried to assure me he'd read somewhere, in some free newspaper, that we had all in fact already lived once in the past and then died. And here they were resurrecting us at this very trial, and we had to account for how we'd lived. That is, our life was the story itself because not only did you have to tell it in detail, you also had to make it understandable. You see, each coin jangling in your pocket was relevant, each word swallowed by the wind, each silence. It was like an investigative experiment that restored the sequence of events. I was standing right here, in the kitchen, next to the rimed window, looking through a hole in the frost, while someone in the yard was scraping off the snow that had accumulated on their car overnight with a yellow plastic dustpan, and she came out of the bathroom wrapped in her robe with her wet hair wound in a towel, turned on the hairdryer, unwound the towel, and started drying her hair, combing it with her fingers, and I asked, "Do you want a child from me?" She asked me to repeat myself: "What? I can't hear a thing!" And he had to show how he stood by the window, felt the glass on his skin, heard the sound of the hairdryer, saw her tangled wet hair and her fingers pushing through it, and to imagine that yellow dustpan in the snow. At this trial no one was in any hurry, since everything had to be carefully sorted out, and therefore a night took an entire night to show and a life an entire life. So they reconstruct everything the way it was, without rushing:

today, cirrus clouds; tomorrow, cumulus. The smells and sounds—to a T. And you show how a pebble landed in your kasha and you broke a tooth—here it is, the yellow chip. Or how he determined from the vomit on the subway car floor that the person had been eating vermicelli, which stank. How he fell in love while he was asleep and woke up before dawn happy. There, do you hear the janitor scraping the asphalt?

Answer: But this was in the yard, look, a freezing African was scraping the snow into a pile with an iron shovel! While over there the little Indians were having a snowball fight!

Question: There he goes again, really, this is all the real deal, even the sounds. In short, everything everywhere is this story. You can't hide anything. Here's how I was born, here's how I lived all those years, here's how I died. But it's all nonsense. In fact, that's not how it was at all. You can't be so naïve as to think that someone is going to agree to listen to you your whole life! Actually, excuse me, I lost my temper, I got sidetracked.

Answer: You mean nothing's going to come of it?

Question: You know yourself, it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Answer: That's it? Can I go?

Question: Wait a minute! Sit down.

Answer: But still I see what interesting work you have. Just like an investigator. What, where, and why. Spill it, this second. Like it or not, make your case.

Question: I wish I had something to make it out of. The investigator has a body, an ax, clues, eyewitnesses, and identification. Up until the last moment you still have no idea who put the poison fish in the pool. A riddle! A mystery! What's the mystery here?

Answer: What do you mean, what's the mystery? What about us? We once lived somehow and now we've come here. Aren't we the mystery?

Question: The only mystery is that you came into this world at all. Everyone is amazed by immaculate conception, and no one believes in it, but a sinful one doesn't surprise anyone. Now here's a mystery: everything has already been, but you haven't yet, and here you are. And afterward, once again, you'll never be. Everything else is known.

Answer: What's known?

Question: Everything. What was and will be.

Answer: But who knows it?

Question: How can I make this easier for you . . . Imagine you get invited to Indian Island. And you're pleased. You're expecting something good, otherwise why invite you at all? You're on your way there and dreaming of love. The woman who happens to be sitting across from you by the window has skin the color of an immature July ash berry, but you feel awkward staring straight at her, and you turn away and look out the window the whole time, while there the evening sky also shines the color of an immature ash berry. It's the sunset driving its color to match her skin. Later, at the shore, the sea seems soapy and the air littered with the cries of seagulls. Wagtails run along the very edge, their little legs mincing. A smelly sort of scum washes to shore. A small pier. The waves beat against its legs, throws grape-like spray on you. Seagulls are perched on the iron railings. The birds are blown up by the wind—one rises for a second and settles back down—and they chirp drearily. Sea and sky run together, like a sweating window, and then the horizon suddenly appears once again, as if it had been drawn with a sharpened pencil and ruler. And here you

arrive and there in your room, on the wall, is a counting rhyme. And it's all written there. About the little Indians having a snowball fight outside, and about you. Because you're a little Indian, you go out to sea, you drown, and Captain Nemo rescues you. He brings you back to his wheelhouse, lets you turn all the levers and wheels, push all the shafts, bolts, valves, and buttons, explains what's for what, and puts his sweat-stained, salt-logged captain's cap on your curly head. Do you understand what I'm talking about?

Answer: I'm not a child. It's all about the counting rhyme. But I didn't figure that out until later.

Question: And then, all the stories have already been told a hundred times. But you—this is your story.

Answer: What kind of story?

Question: Oh, any kind. Some simple, banally sentimental story always goes well, you know, there was a princess and she became Cinderella.

Answer: I became Cinderella?

Question: That's just a manner of speaking. A metaphor!

Answer: Then you should have said so right away, otherwise I'm some kind of Cinderella.

Question: Fine then, you don't like Cinderella, let's do something different. Some unpretentious little device working to increase the tension and acuity of situations, like one against all, one good man among all bad. A knight roaming the subway, fighter for justice, defender of the downtrodden, consoler of orphans, and even more of widows, and he himself unjustly persecuted and suffering for what someone else did. It's tawdry, but it never fails. People invariably sympathize with that combination of good and fists. They thirst for his victory with all their heart.