

VALERY ALEFF

GOD IS IN THE MAKING

STORIES

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Apparently the man, who had been hiding in the oubliettes of a Renaissance castle for three years, spoke last month before a small audience composed mostly of children and old women. What did he speak about? Nobody knows. But everybody knows that the man in hiding spoke last month and not the month before. Actually he had emitted no sound for two years. He had neither sighed nor sobbed, let alone spoken a human language. He must have taken the vow of silence a long time ago. Why then did he speak last month?

Why does nobody know what he said in the course of his speech? Did he speak a foreign language? He did not. Moreover, his articulation was perfect. What did he say then? ‘Nothing,’ reply the children. ‘Nothing,’ reply the old women. ‘A hotchpotch of ideas,’ say all of them in unison. What ideas? ‘We don’t know.’

‘You’re not intelligent enough to understand his meaning,’ say the middle-aged and old men. ‘Next time *we* shall go and hear what he is willing to impart to us.’

They descended into the oubliettes and listened to silence. Time was passing by them, brushing against their shoulders. They felt Time physically as if it were an animal—a prehistoric animal one does not see nowadays on the surface of the Earth. They felt and heard Time, nothing but Time. They did not hear the man who had aroused their curiosity to the point of making them crouch in the subterranean labyrinth and wait for hours and hours.

One of the listeners, angered and terrified by the silence, began to speak himself, gesticulating energetically and chaotically. His voice resounded so mightily in the tunnels of the underworld that those who had not been allowed to join the expedition heard almost every word he uttered. Some of them squatted down and applied their ears to the Earth and floorboards. These heard too much: they heard what had never been uttered or even conceived.

The news was dutifully brought to the nearby villages and towns. ‘The man has spoken. He is angry. He is angry with us. He’ll punish us. He can’t be a man. His voice doesn’t resound like human voices. He says what no human mind can ever conceive. He must be God. In disguise. He speaks seldom, but whenever he speaks the Earth quakes and the volcanoes belch forth fire and stones.’

Their voices resounded so mightily under the vault of heaven that the inhabitants of the capital city heard every other word the villagers uttered. The city scribes compiled a huge book which was handed down to posterity.

2.

Now the castle is surrounded by the police. Only journalists and sages are allowed to visit the man whose anger has become proverbial. The journalists note down every word he might have uttered and ask pertinent and impertinent questions. The sages strive to placate him. They recognise the faults their fellow countrymen have committed ever since the Creation but justify them on the grounds that life is difficult and unpredictable. And they implore him to give them a second chance. ‘Don’t punish us now,’ they say. The man remains silent.

The sages listen to the silence and find that it sounds threatening. They shake their heads and depart despondently: they cannot help bringing bad news to those who await them on the surface of the Earth. The latter listen to what the sages recount and write their words down in their notebooks—for the sake of posterity. Back home, they threaten their children. ‘Why did he go into hiding?’ ask the children. ‘Because he is God,’ say the adults. ‘God doesn’t show himself to all and sundry. Only sages and journalists are allowed to see him and air their grievances in his presence.’ ‘What about us?’ ask the children. ‘Silence!’ shout the adults.

Silence has become popular among humans. ‘Don’t forget that God remains silent,’ say parents to their children. ‘Do you want to look and sound like God?’

It is considered improper to speak at meals or even at school so that the children gesticulate a lot when standing by the blackboard.

3.

Some maintain that the silent man has never spoken at all. Others affirm that the man hiding now in the oubliettes is not the one who made the famous speech. They quote Mathew Arnold:

*But what—I dream! Two hundred years are flown
Since first thy story ran through Oxford halls*

‘He spoke two hundred years ago,’ they add, ‘if he has ever spoken at all.’

‘It is the same man. And He has spoken,’ cut in the sages. They quote Mathew Arnold:

*But thou possessest an immortal lot,
And we imagine thee exempt from age*

‘And anyway God is immortal,’—the sledgehammer argument of the sages.

Some maintain that the man is a criminal. ‘He’s fleeing justice.’

Others affirm that he is deaf and mute. ‘That’s why he doesn’t speak.’

‘But he *hears*,’ cut in the sages. ‘He shakes his head when we ask Him to forgive your sins.’

‘God is deaf and mute. And He is paralysed,’ say atheists.

‘He is not. He moves a lot. He flies above heavy clouds,’ say pilots.

‘He crouches in the oubliettes,’ object the journalists.

‘So God is not God,’ says the man in the street. And he shakes his head. This gesture has also become popular among humans.

THE BUDDHA AND JESUS CHRIST

In this respect (in what respect? In every respect) we might remember the Buddha and Jesus who parted company at some point. Jesus kept banging his head – no blasphemy intended – against a series of walls which he climbed with a view to reaching heaven at the appointed hour. In other words, his world was akin to the notion of determination and there was no other way – no way, as the Americans point out – in spite of his visceral attachment to human freedom. But his freedom was indissolubly linked to his Father Who – at least within the context of the Old Testament – did not seem to tolerate any deviation. If in France, on one of her roads, you see the sign ‘*déviatio*n’, you realise that on no account should you follow this sign’s recommendation because your road is traced by your faith and so you should pursue your itinerary, whatever happens. For example, if you see the sky and all its splendours or your family imbued with beauty – with the beauty of family life, among other things – you should say to yourself, ‘I’ve forsaken all these beauties for the sake of the path I should follow, whatever happens.’ Sure enough, a lot happens on this path, but you follow it, come hell or high water. Recently in some parts of Europe we lived through a period which might be called ‘high water’ because the water I am talking about was really high so that many houses and even churches (in spite of their high protection) were flooded and the flood was almost everywhere, doing its best to remind us of the Flood, of the main and most spectacular punishment of God.

The Buddha, on the other hand – how many hands and arms does he really have? – allows you to wander at will, and your will is almost infinite, according to Schopenhauer. Actually it *is* infinite and so you go from one infinity to another, your will doing its utmost to push you forward or right and left. Sometimes your will goes so wild you find yourself amidst the stars, as Dante did. But then you realise you have no idea what you can do with all these stars and whether you can come to terms with them at all. You approach one star – and you are sure your approach has been seen as a goodwill gesture – and say to this star in friendly tones, ‘You know, I’m your brother.’

And the star answers, ‘I don’t agree with you.’

‘Why don’t you agree with my assertion?’ you ask him or her.

‘Because I’m almost sure I’m your sister.’

‘What does it matter!’ you say in despondent tones.

‘Don’t you believe in the struggles of the sexes? In the *lutte de classes*, in French words?’

‘But we’re in the same class, all of us.’

‘In which class?’

‘We like Beethoven and Mozart and Bach and Schubert.’

‘What else?’

‘We love each other.’

‘Are you Bach or Schubert?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Why should I love you, then?’

Meanwhile the Buddha wanders literally everywhere as if our globe were made up of everywhere, of every cosmos you can conceive in your idle hours, your legs and arms crossed almost forever. The Buddha goes on with his infinite meditation which can only stop at the end of nirvana, and one still wonders whether you have to reach this end or not; if happiness and the absence of everything is your supreme goal. You see a few objects on your dinner table: plates, sandwiches, mugs of beer. You make a majestic movement and all these garden/household/agricultural implements fall and scatter somewhere. Let us limit our description to household implements, however, otherwise the chaos we fear so much (and there is only one chaos in this world) is sure to engulf us completely – like the Black Sea, as the Russians say; whereupon everyone recalls *The Ninth Wave* by Aivazovsky who is still unknown in the West. He does not care; we do not care. But the chaos I am talking about does care, unluckily for us.

So let us return to the Buddha. But why should we *return* to him? And where is he anyway? Wandering, wandering, wandering, like Schubert’s *Wanderer*, as usual. (One of my leitmotifs.) And if we succeed in catching up with him, he might say, ‘You don’t understand my absence.’ And it is true because we can understand any absence only if we do not see the object or subject we are looking for; or we are not allowed to touch it, if ever so slightly. But we do see and touch the Buddha as if he were alive; and he is alive, at least that is what we think. And he goes elsewhere and this elsewhere is everywhere because it is open. And then you take another step and probably bang your head against another wall. After knocking your head against this wall for half-an-hour, you ask everybody, ‘Where’s the Buddha? I’ve an appointment with him.’

SCIENTIFIC DATA

Scientists are renowned for their absent-mindedness and clumsy manners. They are in the habit of dropping glasses, knocking down statuettes, chairs and indeed any object which happens to get in their way as they proceed along some 'mathematical' itinerary. They can also stare into the distance all day long. The void in front of them swarms with equations and geometrical figures. Their clothes are sloppy and rumpled. They never take them off, loath to waste their time on daily routine. They often use their clothes as scientific data.

Dr Pulvius was very fond of his own clothes, especially of his pyjamas. Upon awakening he studied the creases on his pyjamas with zeal and meticulousness, which forced him to stay in bed till lunchtime. He had a mirror by his bed and was looking alternately at his reflection and at his 'real' pyjamas. The creases, which might remind an ordinary, unscientific person of baker's dough, were nothing less than a cipher to him. They contained valuable information about his dreams and nightmares—in other words, about his unconscious. Even after a most meticulous examination of the creases—this examination usually involved the mirror and two microscopes—he would not give his pyjamas to the charwoman or the laundry man. He preferred to keep them in a chest of drawers, together with his underwear, slippers and scarves.

He never asked anybody to iron his clothes for fear of altering his personal history. He was a bachelor and intended to remain alone to the end of his life. He was aware that a woman would interfere with his work, destroying the fruit of his labours by washing and dry-cleaning. He also knew that, in the course of his married life, the creases of his pyjamas would become different from what they were. And he was already used to their pattern that he began to understand at last. Whenever a bug ventured on his pyjamas he adroitly pinned it to them. He assumed that the bug was also part and parcel of his nightmares, of his personal history, of world history. 'The history of the universe might evolve differently had I allowed the bug to slip away into the sheets,' he repeated over and over again.

A mystic, who lived in the house opposite, remonstrated with the scientist on several occasions, calling him a blasphemer and a narrow-minded atheist. 'The history of the universe

doesn't depend on your bugs,' he said. 'A charwoman can't alter the text our Lord has written. Have your trousers cleaned and ironed!'

The scientist haughtily disregarded the tirades of the mystic and continued his research. The mystic shook his head and shrugged his shoulders as he watched the scientist put his pyjamas away.

Shortly afterwards a book with photographs of the famous pyjamas appeared in print and, contrary to the laws of the market, became a bestseller: nobody would have expected such a personal and thoroughly scientific book to have an appeal to the general public. The mystic was so annoyed by the commercial success of the book that he wrote an essay in which he questioned the scientist's morals and warned the inhabitants of the city about the danger they ran.

But nobody heeded his warning. People stared at their pyjamas and fiddled with microscopes. Those who could not afford a microscope had to content themselves with magnifying glasses. Many abandoned their jobs and spent the whole day in their bedrooms, probing into the enigmas of their own egos. The employees of various laundries went on strike.

They brandished a few pairs of pyjamas as they walked down the street. They attacked those who walked around in rumpled and dirty clothes and undressed them without further ado. They threw the dirty clothes into the washing machines which had been installed along the streets on the previous night. Were the police in league with the conspirators? Nobody knew. Some theology students joined in the demonstration.

The demonstrators chanted the *Hymn to Purity* composed within a few hours by an unknown Frenchman. From a musical point of view, the hymn was by no means a success. But the lack of beauty did not seem to affect anybody. The hymn had a 'human touch', as a famous historian put it. What attracted the crowd was the simplicity of the tune and the repetition of the word 'away' which was usually accompanied by an eloquent movement of the arms. Inspired and elevated by the sweeping rhythm of the music, the singers often hit bystanders in the face.

In the long run, musicologists had to recognise the 'hidden beauty' of the popular tune. They found it pure and all-embracing.

The scientist's book had sunk into oblivion but he paid no attention to the fluctuations of fortune. He calmly continued his research, using the same methods and instruments. By now he knew all the enigmas of his unconscious and, out of curiosity, he passed on to the unconscious of his neighbours. He entitled his new work in progress *The Collective Unconscious or the*

Archetypal Pyjamas. He constantly borrowed rumpled trousers and shirts from his neighbours and even from the passers-by walking under his window. Some of these items of clothing were so informative that the scientist had to study them for a whole week. Their owners stood or sat naked in the living room. At night they slept on the floor, wrapped up in other people's trousers. The most renowned painting of the period—*An Allegory of Science*—represents five naked women lying on the floor.

TAKE THAT!

Customs are the signs on the road of human history. We pass by them, often disregarding the directions they suggest, and so they melt away to remain only a parable, a paragraph in a book, a wrinkle on a face.

Nobody fights duels at the end of the twentieth century, but some people do feel the urge to redeem their honour in single combat.

The word 'honour' has not disappeared with the disappearance of duels so that one still may lose one's honour during a cocktail party or a business trip. The scene is well-known: a few words are uttered, a sarcastic grin distends the mouth of the speaker, the offended party springs up and stares at the offender. What else can be done? How to punish the offender?

You can have him evicted from the house, providing the hostess sides with you and the servants are stout and obedient. You can give a call to your lawyer. You can hire a contract killer. You can even kill him yourself. In a back street. Or backstage, during a noisy performance.

What is the use? Your honour is a public affair and you should redeem it publicly, at least in the presence of two other men—the seconds. Your honour should be redeemed on the stage, so to speak.

The point is you are not permitted to offend the offender in public: he may get in touch with *his* lawyer. And other people's lawyers are usually very powerful and skilful.

So an honourable person bent on preserving his dignity at all cost merely steps onto his balcony and levels a water pistol at some innocent passer-by, who may or may not notice this honour-redeeming manoeuvre. If he does, he may call the police. And if he calls the police, the honourable person faces a humiliating trial during which he is bound to realise once again how powerless and miserable his lawyer is.

It is much easier and safer therefore to redeem one's honour by aiming a water pistol at pictures—especially at still lives. At home, not in picture galleries.

Make sure that your water pistol is not loaded: you might ruin the picture you are aiming at.

It is much safer therefore to aim a water pistol at reproductions, at books, at blank sheets of paper.

Or just at heaven.

By the way, you are still allowed to challenge God to duel. Nietzsche did. Ivan Karamazov did.

Have no fear: fighting duels with God will never go out of fashion.

CURE-ALL

Montaigne was wrong: screaming alleviates neither physical nor psychological sufferings.

Yet Montaigne's admirers let themselves go and scream until they grow weary of their own screaming which is nothing but a vocal, not to say musical, expression of their physical and psychological sufferings. They stop their ears or wait until they scream themselves hoarse and eventually lose their voices altogether.

Some of them lose patience instead and, cursing Montaigne and their vocal cords, rush into the streets, hoping that the hubbub of the city will drown out their arias. They also hope that someone will scream even louder, being pursued or wounded by an assassin. And they know by experience that other people's sufferings are the best painkiller one can chance upon in the streets and at home—hence so many molested children and wives.

But some men refuse to strike their wives or spank their children whose sufferings might distract them from their own sufferings. These have no alternative but to inflict wounds on themselves and thereby forget their previous afflictions. If their new wounds are not deep enough to obliterate the former ones, they must deepen them until they fall in a faint and forget everything.

And if they are unlucky enough to recover their senses, they must deepen their wounds once more.

They pierce themselves through and through—often without results.

Many people lie prostrated around our city. The traffic is not so dense now as it used to be only a few years ago. One can still hear a few screams, but they are dying away. They are dying away.

THE ANSWERPHONE

Not tired, not yet. I was tired, three months ago. It's all over, no more problems. People have problems because they attempt to find answers. They attempt to solve problems. Actually there's no such thing as a problem. Life is so clear. Just look out of the window. (*He looks at the window.*) Isn't the view clear? Even on a rainy day you can see *something*. That's enough. And on a foggy day you can see the fog. Or a blurred image, a blur. That's enough. It's a part of the truth. Do people think they'll solve their problems? Is it a question of life and death? Are they dead? Hardly. (*He looks at the answerphone.*) They wouldn't call me so often. (*Pause.*) That's enough, isn't it? Just to be alive. (*Pause.*) These are not long-distance calls! Two blocks away, three blocks away. They're not on the dark side of the moon. That's what I used to call the Hereafter—the dark side of the moon. In my childhood. Death was black because of the clothes my mother was wearing at my uncle's funeral. I was four, my uncle sixty-four. A beautiful black dress. Her eyes were black too. (*Pause.*) What did I wear when she died? A black tie, I suppose. (*Pause.*) Did my mother die? I often ask myself this question in my dreams. (*Pause.*) Not only in my dreams. I'm asking this question now. And nobody answers, not even my answerphone which is supposed to answer all questions. (*He looks again at the answerphone and then shifts his gaze towards his mother's photograph.*) No more messages. Has she forgotten my answerphone? How can she live without my answerphone? Even *I* can't live without it. (*Pause.*) Can I live without my mother? Why do I dream of her so often nowadays? My nightmares. I love my mother, but I don't like her ghosts. (*He peers into the darkness now.*) They're half-naked. Why don't they dress properly, her ghosts? I often dream of gala balls and dinners. Everybody is dressed up except my mother. She comes in half-naked. A bathing suit, at a cocktail party. Posh people, the smart set. We're not on the seashore, mother. She can't hear me. But I can hear her. (*He gets up, walks over to the photograph, picks it up and holds it to his right ear. He puts the photograph away.*) She never listened to me when I was a child. When I was a young man. When did she listen to me? When I was a middle-aged man? I am a middle-aged man. And she still doesn't listen to me. Now she has an excuse, doesn't she? Besides, you can't speak ill of the dead. They're saints. They've become saints in the Hereafter. Even if they're in Hell. Where's my mother? They put her in Purgatory perhaps. Because she'd never listened to me. Or in Hell. (*He peers into the darkness.*) In Purgatory. Let us be magnanimous. She was beautiful and beautiful

women can't live in Hell. Angels need beauty, all around them. Not only beautiful plants or fountains. Human beings, in bathing suits. Bathing beauties, so to speak. (*He looks at himself in a mirror.*) I'll be put in Purgatory too. I listened to my mother. She used to play with my answerphone. Her messages! She used to record her laughter. And her tears. And I listened to her. And to my father, and to my uncle. (*He puts the mirror away.*) But I'm not handsome. It's a sin, a sin of omission. I don't care. They don't see me. (*He looks at the answerphone.*) It's not a television camera. What is it? It's not an answerphone—it never answers their questions. But it records them, *their* questions. Not mine. A questioning machine. (*Pause.*) How many questions are there in the universe? One, two, three, four, five, six. I don't care. There are no more questions, as far as *I* am concerned. No questions, no answers. Ask no questions, as they say. Answer no questions. (*He goes to the answerphone, puts a cushion on it, changes his mind and removes the cushion.*) I'd like to hear them. My voice isn't very beautiful. I need other voices. Not in this room. (*Pause.*) I don't need anything in this room except the answerphone.

TOWERING PASSIONS

Tyrants love children, architecture and music.

Tyrants love children—mainly little girls—for three reasons. Firstly: children are photogenic and their innocence radiates from them to the point of making tyrants look almost like benefactors—especially in the course of the ritual kiss. Secondly: children are a living proof of human immortality. Tyrants do not care for immortality as such. On the contrary, they are the sworn enemies of immortality and eternity. What they actually need is a conveyor belt of punishments, a disassembly-line of tortures. As the flowery waves of children close in upon slow-gliding limousines, tyrants nod their heads with satisfaction: for the near future at least they need not fear a shortage of victims. By the way, even inexperienced tyrants prohibit abortion and the use of contraceptives. Thirdly: when looking into the eyes of children, tyrants see an unalloyed admiration—idolatry in its purest form. The grown-ups have their aspirations and ambitions which, along with fear, surface in their glances. Gallows and monuments can be seen in their imploring eyes. Children are more honest and sincere.

Tyrants love music: it reminds them of celebrations, birthdays and speeches. And tyrants love celebrations, birthdays and speeches. Whenever raising their arms, they hear either thunderous applause or a piece of music. How strange it is to hear nothing as you raise your arm, your eyes sparkling with expectation. And tyrants raise their arms very often. As they do not always have an orchestra or a crowd at their disposal—in the privacy of a country house, for instance—they favour pianists who can play Beethoven's sonatas for them in tiny rooms, in enclosed gardens. Inspired by the *Appassionata* or the *Hammerklavier*, tyrants raise and lower their arms with amazing rapidity.

Above all, tyrants love architecture. They build torture chambers, charnel houses, stadiums and palaces. They never forget columns.

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND I

He looked sublime without a shadow of doubt. Everybody knelt down before him.

He took a step forward and the people got up on their feet. And the people burst their sides with laughter. And they pointed their fingers at his face. He looked ridiculous.

He took another step forward and the people stopped laughing. And they fell on their knees again. And they burst into tears. And they burst their sides with laughter. And they grew sad. And they grew mad. And they locked themselves up in a madhouse. And they let themselves out. And they repented of their laughter and their folly. And they pounded their chests with their fists. And they grew roly-poly. And they giggled helplessly. And they sang a popular song, out of tune. And they waved their hands. And they buried their faces in their hands. And they grew thin and haggard with the constant toil of getting food and clothes and entertainment. And they sought shelter from rain and hail and thunder and snow. And their haggard eyes flashed defiance and desperation. And the light of hope glanced in their black eyes. And they waved their thanks. And they went down on their knees. And they crawled on all fours. And they sprang to their feet again. And they jumped for joy. And they celebrated their deliverance from the hands of their enemies. And they celebrated their triumph and their enemies' defeat and dishonour. And they brought up their children in accordance with the books compiled by their grandfathers. And their children studied mathematics and music. And they adored their children and their grandchildren. And they wept for joy while looking at them. And they wept their eyes out. And they were confronted with a major dilemma. And they entangled themselves in the mazes of sophistry. And they accused themselves of being long-winded and short-sighted. And short-tempered. And they attempted to laugh the matter off. And they weighed up the pros and cons and knelt down again. And they sprang up again. And they challenged the existing order. And they brandished their fists in the air. And they shouted their heads off. And they laughed their heads off. And they threatened their neighbours. And they destroyed their neighbours. And they fawned upon their neighbours, scraping and bowing before them. And they offered presents to their neighbours. And they danced with their neighbours. And they insulted their neighbours. And they cursed their neighbours and thundered forth against their morals and customs. And they rebelled against their grandfathers and their children. And they weighed up the pros and cons. And they went down on their knees again.

He was walking in circles. And the people reacted to every step he took. They laughed and danced and agonised on the grass and suffered torments and passed away and rose from the dead and died again and drank wine in Paradise and burnt in the furnaces of Hell and left their tombs once more. And they wept upon seeing the photographs of their coffins and corpses and they wept their eyes out and they grew blind and they fumbled around in the dark, searching for him, for him alone, and they were healed and they jumped for joy and they sang out of tune and they grew deaf and they grew mute and they continued to open their mouths and they continued to dance and celebrate their victories and they became paralysed and chased each other in wheelchairs.

He walked out of the park. The people were lying about on the grass, silent and motionless.

He drank a milk shake, ate a pancake and returned to the park.

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND II

Two men got stuck in a doorway. They were in a hurry and neither of them was inclined to go through the ritual common among gentlemen who are often observed standing in front of open doors, their hands outstretched invitingly.

They both missed their appointments and remained standing in the doorway. They had plenty of time now. They realised that they should not have left their houses at all.

‘I’m happy I’ve missed my appointment,’ said one of them.

‘If I’d gone there, I would have been killed,’ said the other.

‘And I would have died on the operating table.’

They found two armchairs and sat down. Presently buildings and trees began to shift around as if to compensate for their frozen postures. A number of doors skimmed past them. A number of men saluted them from their offices. A number of bullets were fired. A number of surgeons bent over them with knives and other instruments. They survived the shootings and operations. They did not participate in them, as it were. They witnessed them from afar, from their armchairs.

‘Do you think these bullets are in my body?’ asked one of them.

‘I can’t feel any in mine,’ said the other.

‘One shouldn’t participate in life. And life will go by.’

‘Let it pass.’

‘Everything will happen, all the same. Destiny is unavoidable.’

‘Let it happen.’

‘I’ve the feeling that all this is happening to someone else.’

‘We must endure the destinies of others.’

They fell in love and got married. They never so much as kissed their wives. Yet their children were born and brought up like other children. And their wives were happy. Then they died—both their wives and their children.

They fell in love again and re-married, after a while. Other children were born and educated in American universities. This time their wives were not happy. They died all the same—first their wives, then their children.

‘Let it be,’ said the first man.

‘Let life pass by,’ said the second man.

‘Where does it go, do you think?’

‘I’ve no idea, but I think we’re in the centre of it, like a hub.’

‘And everything goes around us.’

‘So it does.’

LA FORZA DEL DESTINO

My neighbours were knocking on my door that shivered like a neurasthenic.

‘Can’t you turn the stereo down?’ they shouted.

‘It’s not the stereo!’ I shouted.

I realised at once that the music my neighbours had heard was coming from the heart of my hearts, from the harp of my ego.

‘Switch the bloody thing off!’ they shouted.

‘Do you want me to commit suicide?’ I shouted.

They threatened to call the police, to break the door down—to gag me, if necessary. In the long run I yielded to the superior forces and pressed my hands against my heart in order to deaden its music. I even pressed my hands against my soul.

The music died away and, exhausted, I sank into an armchair which vibrated under the weight of my body like a loudspeaker.

As I calmed down it dawned upon me that the piece of music my neighbours had heard sounded more like a siren. A siren, a distress signal. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ I ruminated apprehensively. ‘Is anything wrong with me? I seem to be sound in body and mind. I’ve the feeling—But my feelings aren’t to be trusted, are they? My subconscious is a better judge of what goes on inside me.’ And once again I laid a consoling hand on my soul.

I reasoned myself into a sensible decision—to trust my inner voices rather than my outer impressions. I listened carefully. After a while I heard a sound which reverberated only within the confines of my own body—so soft and intimate it was. No one except myself could have heard it. Was it a call of destiny this time?

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Two men wait before a door. They neither ring the bell nor look through the keyhole. They stand like statues before the door and wait for something to happen.

The door opens and a middle-aged man walks out. He does not so much as cast a glance at the men standing before his door. He must have known them for a long time. They must have stood before his door for many years without ever ringing the bell or calling out to him.

He neither greets them nor informs the police. He is sure they will not break into his apartment with a view to stealing his wife's jewellery. Nor will they attempt to steal his wife herself who is famed for her beauty throughout the neighbourhood. They have no longing to see her come out: they have seen her many times already without so much as doffing their hats or smacking their lips.

She appears on the landing shortly after the departure of her husband and long before the return of her daughter. She has a date with her new lover, but does not bribe the men standing before the door: she is sure they will never say anything to her husband or to her daughter or to her neighbours. So she vanishes from their field of vision, heading for the lift.

Only the door remains within their field of vision now. They stare at the door and wait for something to happen. The daughter comes home. This is not the event they have been waiting for, judging from their indifference and from the fact that they have seen her come home for many years.

They continue to fix their eyes on the door. No light filters through the keyhole. No sound reaches the landing except the voice of the daughter speaking on the telephone to her former lover.

Suddenly one of them consults his watch.

'In five minutes the rehearsal will be over.'

'Do you think we look like statues?'

'I haven't moved ever since he brought us here. Have you?'

'No. He said we should look like statues.'

'They don't seem to notice us.'

'He said we should think of Kafka's door.'

'Of Kafka's law.'

‘Of Kafka’s doorkeeper.’

‘He’s the best stage-director ever. And Beckett is—’

‘We’re not ready yet.’

‘You’re right. The play deserves—’

‘Shall we rehearse it for another year?’

‘Are you tempted to sit down?’

‘No. Are you?’

‘No.’

‘Let us not speak any more.’

‘Let us.’

‘Even if he comes.’

‘Even if he comes.’

FOR PITY'S SAKE

I was walking around my balcony and looking down: looking upward is not my cup of tea, not at all. In the first place, I am loath to trouble God with my stares. In the second place, He might think I am imploring His forgiveness or asking Him a favour. I have no sins on my consciousness and my life is cloudless. I need nothing. I have everything, everything I need. One should not be too greedy or ambitious. Or pretentious. In the third place, there is nothing of interest in the upper regions of the world except God and angels. I am no astronomer!

I was looking down and saw a man for whom I felt infinite pity. I did not know him either personally or by hearsay. He was a stranger, but I pitied him. Can't one take pity on a stranger? Isn't pity a Christian feeling? Aren't we taught at school to take pity on human beings and animals? And strangers deserve our pity even more than our next of kin or friends. Or domestic animals. Why? Because we cannot help them!

Everybody deserves our pity because everybody suffers in this world of ours. In the lower regions of our world.

I even bent down to see him at close range—to pity him at close range, as it were. To make him feel my pity and the warmth of my heart. To bathe him in the streams of my compassion.

He was walking away so fast I almost fell over the balustrade in my endeavour to shield him from the arrows of fate.

I put on my coat and went in pursuit of the man I had chosen among thousands of pedestrians as the object of my pity and generosity. Shortly afterwards I caught up with him in spite of the traffic.

For a while, I followed him closely, almost touching his elbows with my swinging arms. Once he turned back and looked at me circumspectly and even with defiance—an attitude I had not deserved. He had deserved my pity—being a creature of flesh and blood—but I had not deserved his defiance. Not in the least. I smiled and pretended not to notice his malevolence.

I continued to follow in his footsteps despite his malignant attitude, the cars whizzing along our itinerary. Nothing in his physical and sartorial appearance warranted the feeling of compassion which had literally engulfed me during my customary walk around the balcony. Yet I pitied him and, if anything, the feeling of pity had intensified ever since my departure from

home: I was closer to him now and whatever emanated from his soul reached me quicker and with greater impact.

Emanation. That is the word I have been looking for.

While walking behind him, I asked myself the following question: ‘Why do I pity this man? He’s not a beggar. He’s not an invalid.’

Now I am in a position to answer this question.

An aura of misfortune must have been hanging around his body. And this aura reached me as I was walking around my balcony.

And then I found myself walking behind this man through the city streets.

I like walking, especially when I thereby get closer to those who need my help or my soothing voice.

‘Can I help you?’ I asked.

He heard my voice and froze in his tracks. Our bodies collided and I apologised with a bow.

‘What do you want?’ he asked rather brutally. ‘Why are you following me?’

‘You’d better answer this question yourself. What’s the matter? What’s wrong?’

He resumed his walk.

‘Be frank with me,’ I told him. ‘Even if you don’t suffer now, you’ll suffer in the future. Tomorrow, for instance. And I can help you to forestall this suffering.’

He continued to walk without turning his head. I persisted in pestering him—for his own good.

‘Perhaps you’re suffering already. Many people suffer without knowing it. Everybody suffers, as a matter of fact. Such is life. The black aura of death hangs around us.’

He stopped and clenched his fists. I went on undaunted: those who relieve the suffering of their fellow men must suffer.

‘Are you married? Does your wife stay at home when you go out and walk around the city? Are your children healthy? And what about your heart, blood pressure and liver? Do you drink alcohol? Has your father died of cancer? It’s hereditary, you know. And I can help you. My doctor is excellent. And he works in a hospital where lots of cancer patients are treated with loving care and by means of modern technology. I’m also acquainted with a private detective whose discretion and efficiency are legendary, at least in this country. Supposing your children

come home a bit earlier than usual. What are they likely to see? What might they chance upon in your bedroom? You'd better lock your bedroom every time you go out. Do you have a divan in your living room? Or a carpet?'

He quickened his step. 'What are you doing outdoors? You should go home immediately!' I cried.

He quickened his step. 'I'll lend you my gun!' I shouted.

He flung his arms up in exasperation and broke into a run.

'I know an excellent lawyer,' I thought.

THE MELOPHILE

A flame flickered in the darkness—the flame of a lighter, judging from its breadth and length.

The flame moved down and illuminated a slipper and a hand that took the slipper. Soon the other slipper was found. A woman began to cry.

‘I love you,’ said a man. ‘Don’t cry. The neighbours might hear you. They’ve already heard a lot.’

‘Their ears must be overburdened with words.’

‘Not their ears—their brains,’ said the man in pontifical tones. ‘Words don’t remain in human ears. They slip into human brains and twirl around. The greater their quantity the quicker they twirl within our brains.’

‘Do you think they’ve heard the word “love”?’ asked the woman.

‘I think so.’

‘Could you repeat it, please? I want them to know you love me dearly, with all your heart.’

‘Do I have to say I love you *dearly*?’

‘Just say, “I love you.” That’ll be enough.’

‘I love you.’

‘But they’ll see you leave my flat.’

‘I won’t turn on the lights.’

‘They see *everything*! They know *everything*!’

‘So they must know I’ve got an urgent business to attend to.’

‘They know it’s a lie.’

‘They can’t possibly know *that*. They’ve never been to my office.’

‘They can *hear* you’re lying!’

‘Let’s be silent for a minute,’ suggested the man.

‘Do you think they heard our silence?’ asked the woman.

‘They might have been talking to each other.’

‘About us, you mean?’

‘About us, about their own problems. They’ve a lot to talk about.’

‘I heard your silence,’ said a man’s voice. The voice was coming from behind the nearest wall. ‘Your silence was beautiful. You’re right—words twirl in my brain like dead leaves in the

wind. They make me dizzy. They give me nausea. What's the result? Splitting headaches, sleepless nights. Still I listen to them. Can't help it. Curiosity killed the cat. My fatal disease. Listening to the words of others. But I prefer silence and footfalls. And I adore the silence of ruptures. What a rapture! And I revere the music of irrevocable departures.'

THE LIAR

‘If you stroll alongside a brook long enough to come to its end and to the end of its end, you’re sure to reach the sea,’ my grandfather used to say as he puffed his pipe and lulled himself to sleep in his rocking chair.

Ever since my grandfather’s death I have strolled alongside so many brooks they might have become an ocean, if put together—side by side. But I have never reached the sea or even a modest river.

Brooks have a knack of disappearing under the Earth so that I stop in the middle of nowhere, gazing at a hole which seems to guide the valiant to a gigantic subterranean sea.

‘Don’t linger on the surface of life,’ my grandfather used to say. ‘Go deeper and deeper into it! You should dive into the sea of life. Don’t swim on the surface! Dive! Dive! Deeper and deeper! Life begins in the bowels of the earth. And life ends at the centre of the Earth. You should squeeze into holes and tunnels and keep moving until you reach the centre of the Earth, the core of life—the truth.’

Easier said than done. Of course the truth is hidden under the surface of life—under every word, under every movement, under every object. But how to find it? You can remove the objects to discover what is hidden underneath. You cannot remove a movement, a word, a landscape, unless you close your eyes and stop your ears.

‘Probe to the bottom of every word you hear,’ my grandfather used to say. ‘You’ll find a huge lie, a pile of lies, a pyramid of lies, a sea of lies! And these lies are the truth—the truth of our existence.’

I stand in the middle of nowhere. A landscape unfolds before my eyes. And there is another landscape beyond this landscape. There is another twilight beyond this twilight, another lie beyond this line of trees, beyond the lullaby-like lapping of waves. There is the sea beyond this lake—the subterranean sea.

There is another lie beyond the lie you told me yesterday: the lie you will tell me tomorrow. And that is the truth of my love, the bitter truth of my love—the sea of love, as my grandfather might have said.

His death was a peaceful landscape.

WATCHING TV

1

I will not switch the sound on, not for the moment. I'll try to *guess* what they are talking about—just a game of mine, a television game, applauded and emboldened by a multitude of people. I think in terms of games at present. I think I must win something, somewhere, or else I'll lose *everything* down to life and immortality. (The subject of the last religious programme.) And I have no intention of losing both my life and immortality. Not even in a game.

What are *they* talking about? I can read neither lips nor minds, even when I have an opportunity to touch the heads of the people whose thoughts I am eager to read. I touch the screen again and again. Nothing except the feeling of cold penetrates *my* mind. And their gestures are not as eloquent as those by which actors and actresses used to communicate in silent movies. She is looking at his legs. Why? Does she want him to run somewhere? What for? To kill somebody? To make love to another woman? Hardly. To buy something? Or does she simply like his legs? And what about *her* legs? Why is she wearing trousers? Why don't they drive to the nearest beach? It must be pretty hot in their room, judging from his short-sleeved shirt and the ventilator going full blast.

You may remain where you are. Anyway you would not be allowed to bathe in the nude. (An American movie.)

They *are* speaking about murders. (An American movie.) I guessed as much.

'Congratulations!' says the host.

I bow to the audience, smiling, almost on the verge of tears. I shake the host's hand and am offered a lustrous, luxurious motorcar. I settle down in it and drive away from the television studio, further and further away, along my corridors.

Are their murders more important than my life? They are. But for them, my life would disappear, vanish into thin air. But for those murders, I would already have been murdered. By the absence of *other* images. One might become conspicuous by one's absence. One might also be killed by absence, inconspicuously.

She suggests they should swap murders, as Hitchcock did in *Strangers on a Train*. 'Hitchcock made a movie about it,' she says. 'He knew what he was doing.'

Her lover gets the feeling *he* was one of Hitchcock's actors, in his former life. Hitchcock must have chosen him from millions and millions of young men flocking into the cinema studios in the hope of being engaged. And he succeeded, didn't he? The movie is famous, isn't it? He must be rich, fabulously rich. 'Run away,' I tell him. 'You did it, you did it. No point in doing it again. Hitchcock wouldn't have shot the same movie twice. Actually he was caught, in Hitchcock's movie he was caught or shot dead. He died anyway. Do you want to die? You don't need her money or rather *his* money, her husband's money. Why should you kill her husband? She isn't beautiful. I wouldn't kill him for *her* sake. I might kill him to marry Greta Garbo, but he isn't *her* husband, is he? Greta Garbo's husband. It depends on how old that actor is, the one playing her husband. Where is he, by the way? You're allowed to kill him so I can see his face and body.'

Wait a minute! Greta Garbo appeared in a movie for the last time at the beginning of the forties, if I am not mistaken. In forty-one. He *might* have been her husband in that film, her young handsome husband. Her son, rather. And she was in love with her son. In *Anna Karenina*. Her motherly instincts were aroused through Tolstoy's style.

She loves her son even more than her husband. Her son counts much more in her cinematic existence than anybody else. And she refuses to marry *me* because her son will not hear about another father—the 'second father', as he puts it. 'Every child has only one father, mummy,' he says to Greta Garbo all the while playing with a lead soldier.

Were they talking on the same channel? When was it? Two murders, criss-cross. Did they intend to commit them on two different channels? *That* would be a perfect murder. No motive, all the motives are on another channel. Lots of alibis. And the weapon has been hidden on another channel as well. But the money is on *this* channel, right in my room, behind the television set. Inside it. And the police are investigating all murders on another channel, in my neighbours' living room.

They cannot merely repeat Hitchcock's movie. Something *different* must happen.

His wife stands before him—back from the dead, as it were. (She does not really look alive, though, as if being written off as dead for some time had left an indelible mark on her features.) She has read the script and knows all his moves in advance.

Why this close-up shot of his ear? Am I called upon to interpose and prevent his wife from carrying out her obnoxious scheme? 'She *was* killed in *Strangers on a Train*,' I whisper in her

husband's ear to remind him of the other woman and her suggestion. And her betrayal. I am also tempted to insert Hitchcock's cassette in my machine so as to set things right.

'Then you should stab the other woman,' I shout to the knife. Is it within earshot? I should find it first.

She must be hand in glove with the other woman. They must have met behind the screen—at my neighbours', for instance. They are not allowed to get too far away from the movie, from its magnetic, cinematic field. From my television set. They are not allowed to break the rules of television games by moving too far away, as far as Liverpool or Mexico City. They are not allowed to plot in Moscow suburbs! There is such a thing as offside, you know!

Suppose they break the rules. Suppose they go as far as Venus. On foot! They might be living in a virtual world. And this man has just got stuck within my television screen. What *can* he do? What can *I* do? Can I put him up for a night in my virtual world? Do I have one? My worlds are too real to be regarded as virtual.

I can shield him from their wrath by putting him up for a week or a fortnight. Duration is vital to the unfolding of a plot, even in a documentary. This film is unlikely to last for a fortnight. (I haven't bought a TV guide for years—for centuries, in terms of cinematic time.) It is not a soap opera, is it? I suppose it will be over in an hour. And I am prepared to talk to a stranger for an hour, in my room. We shall talk about the movie and his wife. And his mistress.

He is off the screen now. They might have assassinated him while I was engaged in my cogitation and calculations.

2

My television set, my servant. Am I right to let him believe we are on an equal footing? Won't he grow insolent with the passing of the years? He might end up disobeying my remote-control commands. He might show me *other* films, *other* programmes, *other* faces—the ones I have no liking for. He might assassinate me with some ray or other, by emitting some poisonous rays or waves or images. Can one be poisoned by an image, by a film? Are there poisonous films on the market, in television studios, within this room? Or poisonous, deadly sounds?

One day he might pull the screen off and shoot me dead with a revolver. He would rather *shake* the screen off. These electronic creatures have not been endowed with hands or pincers and consequently must dress and undress by means of reiterated jerks.

Shall I try and open him to find out whether there *is* a revolver within his insides? How should I proceed? I had better not remove the screen lest he shoot me outright, at point-blank range. What if I do it from behind? Can he *turn* the revolver? Can he take aim at my body? Can he kill a moving target? Shall I pace up and down this room, round the clock?

‘His television set was after him and he had to stay on the move, so much so that he died of exhaustion. RIP. Rest in pieces.’ A nice epitaph. Shall I seek refuge in the Hereafter? Are there televisions in the Hereafter?

Perhaps I should become *estranged* from him. Shall I switch him off and put the remote control aside? I might hide the remote control, somewhere, in a snowdrift from my past, in the chest of drawers that stood in my bedroom, in our country house. He might forget me. He might take offence and forget me, let me down. He might *leave* me.

THE SMACK OF OSCULATION

Kisses are often heard in the night, at the break of day, on sunny afternoons—in the streets, in the back streets, on boulevards, on squares. Some of them are sincere and love-inspired. Others are not. Do the latter sound different?

Did the kiss of Judas sound like an ordinary kiss, unaltered by malignant intentions? Or like a dissonant chord? Or like the Tristan chord in which the fundamental impossibility of love is emphasised with such sadism?

Was it a silent kiss?

(Silence can be ominous, tragic, treacherous, deafening, thundering. Silence reverberates down the centuries. The silence of timorous friends. And the silence of mercenary witnesses. And the silence of God.)

Every new kiss arouses our suspicions and, once it is over, we glance back to make sure nobody is about to arrest us.

Sometimes we notice a lot of soldiers around. They do not move from where they contemplate our kisses with apparent indifference. They neither go away nor threaten us with guns or handcuffs. What are they doing on our landings and staircases? What are they doing in the streets where we stride and drive our cars? What are they doing in the parks where we read newspapers and history books? What are they doing on the swings in our gardens?

They follow in our footsteps on the off-chance that somebody *will* betray us—on the seashore, on a drawbridge, at the market place, in a movie house. (A man, a woman, a child, the nurse of the child.) And they attach importance not only to the kisses we exchange with our friends or relatives but also to every gesture of ours, to the faintest glitter in our eyes—a telltale reflection of the moonlight, for instance. Even the moon can mark us out for trial and execution. Even the moon can betray us.

It is preferable therefore to stay at home and lean out of the windows for a breath of fresh air only on cloudy nights when the moon is invisible and innocent, sincere and welling with love for humankind.

The soldiers are invisible on moonless nights. They may however keep guard in our gardens—along the gravel paths, around the flowerbeds, on the swings. But we do not intend to

go out, exposing ourselves to the dangers of the open air, to the kisses of strangers and strollers, to the embraces of the night.

We shall stay at home. We shall wait in our armchairs until the soldiers break into our flats and take us somewhere—to the dirtiest courtyard, to the farthest concentration camp. Even the silence of the spheres can betray us.

We shall offer no resistance. We shall not lock ourselves in our bathrooms or crawl under our beds.

We shall kiss the nearest soldier.

And the sound of our kiss will reverberate throughout the universe.

DOSTOEVSKY AND HIS KARMA

The atmosphere in the room was fraught with danger and hatred. The people in the room suspected nothing. Yet everything was already in the room: blood, murder, the torments of Hell.

I asked everybody to be silent. They stopped talking and listened to the reverberation of their recent words. ‘Do you feel anything?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said two women.

‘The air is thick with hatred,’ I said. ‘The air is thick with blood. Try and walk around the room.’

Everybody complied with my wish. For a while, they walked around the room in Indian file as if playing a game. ‘You’re not playing a game,’ I said. ‘It’s very serious.’

They stopped walking and began to stare at me. ‘Why are you staring at me?’ I asked. ‘You should withdraw into yourselves to find an answer to my questions and your problems. The hatred is inside, not outside.’

‘It’s already outside, otherwise you wouldn’t have felt it,’ said a bearded man. He broke into laughter.

‘It’s no joking matter,’ I said. ‘Your hatred *is* outside.’ And I produced a knife from my attaché case. Its blade sparkled like struck flint, setting the air on fire. ‘The air is burning! Can’t you see?’ I exclaimed.

They shrugged their shoulders, all of them. They did not believe me. I brandished the knife above my head.

‘Do you see the knife?’ I asked. They nodded their heads. ‘So you must see the fire.’ They shook their heads.

‘I hate hypocrisy,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you come into the open, all of you? Why don’t you make a clean breast of it?’ The last question was addressed to the bearded man who winced and gave a cry as if I had twisted my knife in one of his wounds. He was not wounded, not yet. ‘Answer me, please, instead of wincing and whimpering. Why don’t you make a full confession?’

‘I’m not whimpering,’ he answered.

‘All right, you aren’t,’ I agreed, prepared to overlook one or two fibs for the sake of expediency. ‘But why do you hate Ivan? And why are you unwilling to acknowledge it?’ In his

turn, Ivan winced and gave a cry. ‘Do you want us to leave you alone? I hope you’ll manage to thrash it out!’

There were five people in the room and all of them stared at me. ‘I hate and threaten nobody,’ I said. ‘Why stare at *me*?’ I motioned them out. As they submissively proceeded towards the door I put the knife on the carpet—between the two adversaries.

‘I hope you’ll make good use of it,’ I said meaningfully and headed for the door myself. The air was so thick I could hardly squeeze my body through it. My face was burning as if a dozen cigarettes had been stubbed out on my cheeks. I eventually left the room, closed the door and ascertained my whereabouts. Everybody except the two antagonists clustered around me in the narrow corridor. ‘Let’s wait and see,’ I said. ‘I’m sure everything will be all right.’ For some reason, I was expecting to hear a shot.

No shot was fired. Five minutes later, weary of waiting and dying of curiosity, I peered through the keyhole which, being as narrow as the corridor, did not afford a panoramic view of the room where a dramatic action had been set into motion through my perspicacity. I could not see the protagonists but I spotted the knife that was still lying on the carpet, untouched and apparently unwanted. ‘The knife,’ I whispered through the keyhole. ‘Have you forgotten the knife?’

Another five minutes elapsed in silence. I saw nothing except the knife, the carpet and a stretch of faded wallpaper. I lost my patience, flung the door open and strode into the room.

They were sitting and sipping cognac. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘We’re sitting and sipping cognac,’ they answered almost in unison.

The air was even thicker than ten minutes before. There hung a sort of iron curtain between us—a translucent iron curtain. I was in no position to reach the carpet. So I collapsed on the floor.

I writhed and foamed in savage pain for quite a while. My convulsive contortions elicited a tremendous applause from the audience.

Once again I resolved to die forever.

And once again I was born with a knife in my hand—a paper knife.

THE BEGINNING OF A BLUE MOVIE

The doorbell rang and the housewife opened the door. A guest bowed, kissed her hand, took his raincoat off, threw it on a chair and propped his umbrella against the wall.

‘It’s raining cats and dogs,’ he said.

‘Is it really?’ she answered. ‘How unfortunate!’

They both went into the living room and sat down. The doorbell rang once more. The housewife said, ‘I’m sorry, I must go and see who it is. Do you mind my leaving you alone for a minute or two?’

‘Not at all,’ said the guest. ‘Not at all.’

The housewife rustled along the corridor and opened the door once again.

Another guest was standing on the threshold of the apartment. He bowed, kissed the housewife’s hand, took his raincoat off, threw it on the chair and propped his umbrella against the wall.

‘It’s raining cats and dogs,’ he said.

‘You’ve already arrived,’ she said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You’re sitting now in the living room.’

‘Am I?’

‘I’ve left you alone for a minute or two.’

‘Do I look like...*him*?’ asked the man.

‘I don’t think so. But you *are* him.’

They both went into the living room. The first guest was sitting on a divan. He stood up as the housewife appeared in the doorway with the second guest.

‘I don’t look like him,’ said the second guest to the housewife.

‘How do you do!’ said the first guest to the second guest.

‘How do you do!’

They all sat down on the divan and looked at each other.

The doorbell rang once again. The housewife got up and walked over to the window. She opened it and stretched her hand out.

‘It’s *not* raining,’ she said.

‘The rain must have stopped,’ said the first guest.

‘But everything looks...dry!’

‘The sun must have dried up everything,’ said the second guest.

The doorbell rang once again. The housewife rushed out of the living room. The guests remained sitting on the divan. ‘It’s raining cats and dogs,’ they heard a few seconds later.

‘It *is* raining cats and dogs,’ said the second guest, giving the first guest a wink.

‘She’s beautiful, isn’t she?’ asked the first guest.

‘She certainly is. Do you think she’s guessed?’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’

‘Is there enough water in the pail?’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’

Two minutes later the housewife and the new guest appeared in the living room.

‘It *is* raining cats and dogs,’ she said as she unbuttoned her blouse.

The doorbell rang once more.

CORPSING

A beautiful actress was killed last month. The police have no idea as to the identity of the murderer. The police have no clues.

A knife lay beside the body, but it was a fruit knife that belonged to the actress. Apparently she had been eating a piece of fruit just before the fatal blow struck her. What kind of fruit was she eating? An apple—the apple of discord, as a police officer dubbed it.

On the eve of her untimely death the actress had quarrelled with her lover who, accordingly, was taken into custody, becoming the number one suspect—*suspect numéro un*. ‘I loved her,’ he said. ‘I worshipped her. I couldn’t have killed her.’ He was released without further questioning.

The actress’s husband knew about her liaison with the young coxcomb—the lover mentioned in the previous paragraph. He knew too much, probably. And he loved her too much—even more ecstatically and profoundly than the lover. So he became the number two suspect.

‘I loved her,’ he said, biting his lips and cracking his knuckles.

‘Why didn’t you say, “I couldn’t have killed her”?’ asked the police officer.

The husband was not released. On the third day of his detention the police found a pistol in the actress’s handbag which was lying not beside her body but a little way off—under a sofa.

‘She must have committed suicide,’ said the police officer in a stentorian voice—for everybody to hear. And the lover of the actress heard him all right.

‘How?’ asked the lover. He hated the husband of his mistress so fanatically that even after her death he could not forgive him—the husband—for fondling her body in his absence. No wonder he aspired to send him to the gallows or to prison—for life.

So he repeated his question: ‘How? How? Did she put her pistol back in her handbag after committing suicide? Did she fling the handbag under the sofa—’

‘She might have wounded herself,’ said the police officer. ‘Fatally,’ he added after a momentary hesitation. ‘But she had enough strength to close her handbag and fling it—’

‘Show me the wound!’ said the lover. There was no wound on the actress’s body. ‘He killed her, I tell you!’ shouted the lover. ‘Her husband!’

‘How?’ asked the police officer.

‘He must have strangled her!’

They both bent over the corpse and examined its neck. So far, the lover had missed no opportunity to bend over his mistress’s corpse. The police officer likewise enjoyed this physical exercise.

‘No signs of strangulation,’ said the officer.

‘When will you allow me to bury her?’ asked the lover. ‘Does she have to lie in the living room? Can’t you have her body conveyed to a mortuary?’

‘Before removing the body from the spot where the renowned actress was killed, we should find out whether she was killed or not,’ said the officer, extracting a notebook and a pencil from his pocket.

‘But a week ago you said she’d been killed.’

‘It was a newspaperman who spread the rumour,’ said the officer.

‘Do you think she might be alive?’ asked the lover, bending over the beloved corpse once again.

The corpse had been lying in the room for eight days now, but no signs of decomposition could be found on it. Besides, nobody seemed to have killed the renowned actress. She was lying on the carpet like a flower that did not know how to fade and wilt.

‘She’s a saint,’ exclaimed a member of her fan club. ‘She lies there untouched by death, by the laws of the Hereafter.’

‘It’s my love that keeps her alive in death,’ said the lover, bending once again over the body and even bestowing a kiss upon the fresh-as-a-daisy face of his former and, in a sense, his present mistress.

‘She was bad at school,’ said her old teacher. ‘She didn’t learn how to die. I devoted three lessons to the science of death, but she played truant.’

‘She simply doesn’t know her part,’ said a film director. ‘Gérard! Where’s Gérard? Go and fetch him! Where have you been? Okay. Where’s your knife? Stop eating this rotten apple! Wipe your mouth, first! Do you have a handkerchief? Give him a handkerchief! A paper handkerchief will do! Okay. Everybody’s ready? Take thirteen!’

Two hours later, Gérard was charged with murder and conveyed to the nearest police station.

A JEALOUS MOTHER

A young woman is tied to a bed. A man is perched on a windowsill. She asks him to release her. He does not budge from his perch. He looks like a bird of prey. His mouth looks like a beak. The man has black and white feathers, and a long pointed orange beak. At last he slides off his perch and tiptoes towards the woman. And he kisses her on the neck, his wings flapping, his body trembling all over. She lets out a piercing shriek. An old woman appears at the threshold of the room. She observes the scene for a while and then retraces her steps, walking away through a corridor. The man resumes his place on the windowsill.

‘Please untie my hands,’ says the young woman.

‘Stay with me. I’m afraid you’ll leave me if I untie you. Why do you think I’ve grown these wings? To fly after you, to catch up with you. I’ll pursue your body everywhere, on the Earth, on the Moon. Even in your next incarnation I’ll find and capture you. If you become a bird I’ll build a nest for you. If you become a trout I’ll swoop down from the sky and snatch you from lakes and rivers. If you become a woman I’ll pick this rope up and tie you to this bed with my beak.’

And once again he slides off his perch, sweeps up to the woman and pecks at her neck. She shrieks in alarm. The old woman looms out of the corridor and observes the scene, silently, passively.

THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

‘You don’t know me, do you? You’ve never seen me before, I suppose. So allow me to introduce myself. Why should *I* introduce myself? Why don’t *you* do it first? Who are you? Do you deserve my confidence? Why should *I* confide in you? I won’t confide in *you*!’

And he stopped talking. His face was a playground of contradictory and somehow complementary emotions. He longed to pour his heart out, but there was nobody around him. And he hesitated to speak to the wall which stood in front of him like a geometrical giant.

He had no crimes to confess. He was not in love either. He wished to talk to somebody and there was nobody around. And there was nothing to talk about.

He talked about nothing for five minutes, stopped, opened a can of beer and emptied it in one fell swoop. Then he decided to talk about something—about his life. There was nothing else to talk about.

He could not talk about the future: there was none. He would not talk about the present: there was no point in talking about the present—about the weather and the wall. He decided to talk about his past. There was no point in talking about the past either, but he just felt like it.

He talked about his past for a while and then stopped, as if he had died of consumption in his youth. But he had not died in his youth. Even now he was still alive in spite of everything. He was alive and, on top of that, in the mood for talking and pouring his heart out. And he was on top form.

He went back to his childhood once again and described his father with accuracy and sympathy. Then, all of a sudden, he accused him of selfishness and said his father had ruined his life and that of his sister Lucie. ‘You were worse than Kafka’s father,’ he said.

He took a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and set about writing a letter to his late father. ‘Many years ago, I decided to have it out with you. And I wrote you a letter. But you died and I didn’t post the letter. Now I shall post it. You were a bad father.’

He stopped writing, opened a can of beer and emptied it in one swift draught, thrusting his head backward. Then he leaned over the sheet of paper lying before him and picked up the pen which had left a few ink blots beside the paper.

‘Do you remember that night, father? I saw you. I squatted down and looked through the keyhole. And I opened the door ever so slightly. And I looked through the crack. You didn’t see me, did you?’

‘Do you remember that afternoon, father? I kissed my cousin Emma. You were spying on us. And as soon as the kiss was over you opened the window. Do you remember what you said? Do you remember the tone of your voice?’

He deposited the pen on a stone and lifted the unfinished letter from a tree stump. He read it twice and tore it to shreds. Then he took another sheet of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it carefully. He put it down on the stump and picked up the pen.

‘Dear mother,’ he wrote. ‘Why did you do this to me? Was I a bad son? I don’t think so. And she was a nice girl, wasn’t she?’

‘Why did you marry my father? Why didn’t you love him? He was a handsome man, wasn’t he? Very intelligent too! He was a brilliant man, an outstanding scientist. Why did you never stroke his forehead? Why did you never try to smooth out his wrinkles?’

He stopped writing and resumed his one-way conversation with the wall. After a while the wall collapsed under the burden of his words, under the load of his past.

He stared at the ruin for seven minutes and stuffed his hand in one of his pockets. ‘The Great Wall of China,’ he murmured wistfully, producing and unfolding a huge map. He leaned forward and consulted it, his finger gliding on its surface in a criss-cross pattern. He folded both the map and the letter he had written to his late mother, pocketed them, picked up his pen and headed east.

A DEMONSTRATION

‘Behind our Party stand the millions of workers in the cities, the soldiers in the trenches and the peasants in the villages!’

‘Before our Party stand—’

‘—like a beacon of international Socialism!’

‘We should have but one slogan: seriously learn the art of war!’

‘We have sufficient territory and sufficient natural wealth to provide everybody not with superfluities but, at all events, with adequate means of existence!’

‘Do not die like flies! You are not flies!’

‘Who are we?’

‘Have you enlisted?’

‘Proletarians of All Countries—’

‘The enemy is far from exterminated!’

‘Who are you?’

‘Smiles and cheers!’

‘You have to go to the very end!’

‘We must exert all our influence and call everybody to arms!’

‘He who does not work, neither shall he eat!’

‘Neither shall he walk!’

‘We are speaking in different tongues!’

‘Are we speaking?’

‘—at the helm—’

‘—in the night—’

‘Hands off—’

‘Hands up!’

‘Forward march!’

‘One step forward, two steps back!’

‘One step to the left, two steps to the right, three somersaults—’

‘—refined lackey—’

‘Victory or Death!’

‘The entire nation is exultant and cheerful as never before.’

‘Every crisis breaks some and steels others.’

‘The senile rule of international capital!’

‘Victory or Life!’

‘Let us dispose of our souls.’

‘Our hearts are beating!’

‘The firing squad—this is the legitimate fate—’

‘Man is free from the guardianship of God!’

THE EROTIC DREAMS

1

Once a month I see my last mistress behind a rose bush. Her lips and body still have an irresistible appeal for my senses and for the rest of my substance. So I deviate from my itinerary and run towards her, jumping over roots and stones. Her body smells like a rose and I kiss it madly, passionately, eternally. Let us call it body, for decency's sake. My ululating soul sounds like a good-natured invitation to a dance and we dance for a while on the lawn of our garden. It is our garden, isn't it? Our private Garden of Eden. And then she leaps into an abyss.

She put her hand around my neck and kissed me on the shoulder and on the dimple that adorns my left cheek. Or was it my right cheek? Wait a second. It is on the left-hand side. I have a sort of cavity on the left-hand side of my face. Did she kiss me on the mouth? She did, I am sure she did. I still recall the taste of her lipstick and the smell of tobacco. I don't smoke. She smoked a lot. Often she puffed smoke into my face. Who was she? One of my mistresses. Or my wife perhaps.

She was beautiful on that occasion. On what occasion? On many occasions. A tête-à-tête dinner, in my bed. We had no time. Everything happened so quickly! And slowly.

2

What is this youngster doing in my cave? Tell me about yourself, if you don't mind. Who are you? Are you a robber? Where's my blanket? Did you take my blanket? Why did you take my blanket? I am freezing. Is it a winter-tale or what? Are you Shakespeare?

Will you help me brush my teeth? You're kind and generous, aren't you? And you're my servant, aren't you? Buy me a sandwich, please. Ham and salad. Some salad, vitamins. Those who eat vitamins live very long and are never hospitalised. Don't forget a bottle of mineral water. I must eliminate. What should I eliminate? Life? Death? Eternity? You'll tell me everything. You're intelligent, aren't you? Did you read the books I'd given you as a birthday present? When is your birthday? Are you God? Are you myself? I'll give you a toothbrush this time. It's your gums I'm concerned with. Gums are important. They warned me about my gums on television. They also warned me about you. You're a murderer, they said. I paid no attention to their warnings. I love you, whoever you are. Don't leave me, please. Didn't your grandmother enjoin

you to assist elderly people, relieving them of the burden of years and tears? Didn't she? She must have. I'm helpless. Not like a child, like a doll. A doll forsaken by a versatile child. Don't leave me. I wish I were dead. The old are respected, the dead worshipped. Many people come and look at them. You have come too. Why don't you worship me? Am I not dead enough to awaken a respectful feeling in your bosom? I don't know where this kind of feeling usually lodges, but I hope it might be near your heart.

A GHOST STORY

‘The castle is haunted by disembodied spirits,’ said the poster. I purchased a ticket and entered the castle.

I encountered no spirits on the ground floor and therefore went upstairs. I hoped to find my dead fiancée in one of the bedrooms—hovering under the canopy of a Louis XV bed.

My fiancée had died two years before, but in vain had I undertaken to banish her image from my mind and accustom myself to her eternal disappearance. I suspected she was walking or lying or hovering somewhere. She used to love haunted castles and suddenly I remembered the words she had uttered once, in the dead of night: ‘I wish I could haunt a castle. After my death.’

I came across two spirits in a long, portrait-adorned corridor. One of them was a man, the other a little girl.

‘It’s *him!*’ cried the little girl, looking me straight in the eye. ‘I’ve come here to haunt *him!*’

‘Murderer!’ shouted the man, grabbing me by the throat. I wrenched myself free and rushed downstairs.

‘Did you see them?’ asked the warden as I passed through the gate and was about to unlock my car.

‘I did.’ I saw no reason to deny it.

‘Did they accuse you of being a murderer?’

‘They did.’ I saw no reason to deny that either.

‘Did the man grab you by the throat?’

By way of an answer, I unbuttoned my shirt and exhibited my neck.

‘But he didn’t strangle you, did he?’ And the warden bent over the instrument panel in his gate lodge.

A fortnight later, I purchased a castle and an instrument panel that I installed in a hothouse, near a bizarre flower. I concentrated upon the image of my fiancée, which kept hovering in my mind like a bird of ill omen or a spirit, bent over the panel, switched the power on and pushed all the buttons. The panel glimmered like the starry firmament as I glanced back before leaving the hothouse.

I entered the castle, went upstairs and saw my fiancée at the end of a long mouldy corridor. A man stood by her side.

‘Who’s this man?’ I screamed. ‘Why do you betray me in the Hereafter? Why haven’t you cooled off in the coffin? Has your soul been flambé-ed in the fires of Hell?’

‘It’s *him!*’ cried my fiancée, looking me straight in the eye and tugging at her lover’s hand. ‘I’ve come here to haunt *him!*’

‘Murderer!’ shouted her lover, grabbing me by the throat.

‘Murderer!’ I thought as I sank down on the carpet.

A LETTER

He thought his life might change if he just removed one letter from it. You remove one letter from it or anything else, and everything becomes beautiful as if there were only letters in the world. You remove one letter and you replace this letter with another one. And everything glows in response to your movements.

So he removed one letter, writing, 'Indows.' He realised he could no longer open any window in his house. Actually he could open all of them, but they remained closed somehow, and when windows remain closed, you cannot see a lot, especially if you wish to see the world. And he did wish to see the world because he had remained cooped up in his house for many years instead of travelling all over the Earth and the Moon.

He thought that, by removing a letter from words and sentences, he would clear the road to happiness – after so many accidents and misfortunes. Instead, he was closing the world, writing, 'Widows, cows, owls,' so that his windows became widows, cows and owls. For a while he lived with these widows after marrying them, for he did not like concubines and children born out of wedlock. He also lived with cows. And yet he did not know how to milk them. As for owls, he did not *live* with them. He just *listened* to them, to their hoots – to their *howls*, as he wrote in his diary. Anyway, he liked music and even cries and screams reminded him of Mahler's symphonies.

He lived with letters and no letter has ever complained about his way of life which was focused only on permutations, substitutions and other manipulations as a result of which the world – at least his own world – used to suffer nervous breakdowns on a regular basis. We can play with words, but words cannot play with worlds because a great many worlds are silent. And no one will ever teach them the alphabet.

THE SPIRAL

While others fretted and fumed, he remained unruffled. He stood in a corner and fiddled with a silver cigarette box which was empty and consequently sounded hollow whenever he closed it.

The box slipped from his fingers and dropped on the floor which likewise sounded hollow—as if there was nothing under it. He picked the box up, chuckled to himself and nodded approvingly.

The voices he heard in the room sounded hollow as well. They were empty and, to verify whether he was right or wrong, he extracted one voice from the air, held it close to his eyes and looked at it. There was nothing inside the voice—no words, no commas. Only exclamation marks! But they were translucent.

He fiddled with the voice for a while and then dropped it on the floor—intentionally. He heard no sound.

He approached a violinist, who still fretted and fumed, and touched his breast with outstretched fingers. The fingers plunged into the breast. The arm slipped through the violinist's body and appeared on the other side—right under his collarbone. The violinist took no notice of the manoeuvre. He turned instead towards the corner where the man had stood a few moments ago and gave a cry, imitating the other cries which had already resounded in the room.

Unable to withstand the impulse, the man caught all these cries with a butterfly net he had picked up from Nabokov's autobiography and piled them up in the middle of the room. As might have been expected, the pile was hollow.

So I died, thought the man. The thought detached itself from his brain, slipped through his cranium and dropped on the floor beside his feet. He glanced at the corner where he had recently stood and saw his own corpse and the people gathered round it. What was to be done? He went on thinking and his thoughts gyrated to his feet like dead butterflies.

Shall I pass through death, through the souls of the dead, and appear on the other side?

Shall I walk through the Hereafter and come back to this room?

Shall I walk in circles until the world sounds like a Bach sonata for solo violin?

STATE OF EMERGENCY

There is no time in a serious emergency to quibble over means if they achieve the desired ends. And every emergency is serious, for an emergency which is not serious can hardly be called an emergency. Anyway time should not be wasted. Human life is short and whatever is not done at once—on the spot, so to speak—will never be done at all. Forget it! as they say. And you forget it and rub your forehead absent-mindedly in an endeavour to recall what it was all about. And, unable to recall it, you totter away like an invalid. You grow weaker and weaker. You seem to forget how to walk upright. You stumble and fall to the ground at some underground station. You bleed, groan, agonise and die in vain. Why? Because you dallied and did not do what you ought to have done immediately, without the slightest hesitation: it was an emergency after all.

Or you did not dally and acted with due regard for the conditions but, at some point, you quibbled over the means that were bound to achieve the desired ends: you wrote no anonymous letters, you hired no contract killers. So you received two anonymous letters and somebody killed you in your flat. The doorbell rang, you put away the newspaper, rose to your feet, opened the door and a shot was fired—the shot your neighbours did not hear. But they saw your blood on the landing and even called the police and a doctor—three hours later. They were right: it was not an emergency. It was an exception to the rule. And it proved the rule.

Or you did hire a contract killer, but the man whom you wanted to get rid of hired three contract killers so that you were greatly outnumbered and had little chance of winning the game of chance. On their way to your flat the three contract killers did away with the man *you* had hired and reached your apartment exactly on time—at 9.40 p.m. You were so absorbed in the movie based on Agatha Christie's first novel that you opened the door absent-mindedly, without the slightest hesitation.

Or the man whom you were most reluctant to maltreat wrote four anonymous letters to the dignitaries of your native town, depriving you of their respect and protection. It was an emergency and he could not have acted otherwise, lest he be killed either by you or somebody else. And the inhabitants of the town—your neighbours and lifelong friends—began to pelt you with tomatoes and stones whenever you ventured outdoors or stepped onto your balcony.

So you packed your bags and fled the town on a bicycle, lest you be killed. It was a serious emergency.

THE RIVER OF YOUTH

I went for a walk and heard a shriek. What kind of shriek was it? A shriek of excitement? It did not sound that way. The shriek had an urgent emotional edge to it, but the emotion suggested had little in common with excitement or any such thing. Nobody sounds excited at the approach of his own death.

I read a fair amount of fear, horror and anguish into the shriek I had heard. Human emotions can be gauged, measured and calculated in pounds, miles, light-years...in dark-years...in dark-ages...

I measured the shriek, deduced its mathematical and chemical formulas from the sound waves that had penetrated my ears and drew the following conclusion: what reverberated through the night was a shriek of horror. Somebody was drowning in the nearby river. The shriek sounded 'wet'.

It must be a child, I thought. The shriek sounded childish. Anyway it is childish to shriek. Who on earth can come to your rescue? Children are too small and weak. Grown-ups are too tired and prudent.

And I decided not to rescue the drowning child, irritated by the childishness and naïveté of the appeal. 'Let that be a lesson to you!' I shouted in the direction of the river. 'Don't put too much trust in grown-ups! Do you really hope I'll risk my life for the sake of yours? Why should I? Do you think I'm sick and tired of my karma? I'd like to re-read Boswell and Voltaire! And fall in love once more. And get married. And have two children: a boy and a girl. Two beautiful children, three beautiful children. Every grown-up aspires to live as long as possible. You don't believe me, do you? You think I'm a coward. Do you think other grown-ups are audacious enough to undress and jump into the icy water? All right, I'll give you a demonstration. Watch me closely! Let's see if somebody comes to *my* rescue.'

The flow of my thoughts seemed to be influenced by a surreptitious cross-current. The river glittered with greed in the moonlight. 'How many children have you devoured already?' I shouted. I stripped my clothes off, hid them behind a bush and plunged into the icy water.

I swam and dived for a while and then began to drift down towards the sea, carried along by the boisterous and glittering current. The river itself looked and sounded like a child: it was boisterous, impatient, impetuous and youthful. Its eyes sparkled with amusement and curiosity. I

even played a few games with the river, reverting to the heedless abandon of my childhood. And I recalled my mother, her hands and her dresses. I recalled them so vividly that I shouted, 'Mummy!' and laid my head on her lap, longing to feel her fingers in my hair.

And I shrieked. I have no idea what my shriek sounded like: I was unable to analyse it scientifically. I was too small for that kind of analysis. I was a child now. And I realised my father had not yet taught me to swim. But I did not realise I was drowning: at that point I was too small to realise anything.

My eyes sparkled with curiosity.

THE DEATH OF ADAM

The material world is not opposed to the world of the mind and spirit. They form an indivisible entity. They coalesce for us into the indistinct image of God, provided we are mature enough to believe in God and feel his pervading presence everywhere, even in the middle of no-man's land—at the heart of no-God's land, to borrow atheistic terminology.

Wood is a solid substance. Anguish is a solid substance too, provided it is *real*. And it is real, I can assure you.

I often hold my anguish in my hands as if it were a piece of wood, and watch a tiny trickle of blood oozing from it. And I recall the *Divina Commedia*, the canto where Dante depicts human trees and their arm-like branches.

My joy is also solid and, whenever I happen to be in a joyful mood, I make the most of it by caressing my joy with my fingers. And I cajole my joy into staying with me overnight. 'Otherwise I can't sleep,' I say to my joy. But whatever I say to it, however long I caress it with the tips of my fingers, it departs on the first stroke of midnight and my anguish resumes its tale in my hands, in my bed, in my room, beyond my window.

Often my anguish lies outdoors, on the pavement—like an ordinary brick that seems to have fallen from the skyscraper of my anguish. And pedestrians stumble over it, causing a terrible pain in my gut. And I wriggle like a worm. And I know I am a worm, for Creation is indivisible, cocktail-like. And I wonder whether God dwells both in my anguish and in the foot that stumbles over it. And I pray to God, asking Him to withdraw from the feet that stumble over my anguish. 'My pains are unbearable,' I say to God.

My pains are solid as well. It is as if I had a chestnut in my stomach—the chestnut fallen from the chestnut-tree of my distress. Is it a malignant tumour? I am denied the right to hold this tumour in my hands, which would enable me to fling it out of the window. I wish my tumour could lie on the pavement—the target for countless feet!

And I remember Ivan Ilich and Tolstoy. My tumour stands on my shelf and lurks in my stomach. *The Death of Ivan Ilich*. I prop a ladder against the wall, climb on it, reach for the book and fall from the ladder.

I lie sprawled on the carpet—the man fallen from the Garden of Eden.

THE MUSE

Have you memorised my poem? You haven't? The poem I created on the spur of the moment five minutes ago? You were sitting in front of me. You seemed to listen to what I was saying. Why didn't you switch your cassette recorder on? I recited a poem. I improvised it. A marvellous poem. I was inspired. A woman inspired me. She was sitting next to you, on that chair over there. Don't you remember her? Haven't you memorised her face? She left as soon as I finished my poem. She is my muse. Now she's gone forever. No, she won't come back in five minutes. She's gone forever, I can feel it. I know it. I'll never compose another poem in my life, never. One can't write poetry without a muse. Take this woman away! She doesn't inspire me at all! No, this wine doesn't inspire me. No, this painting doesn't inspire me. No, this landscape doesn't inspire me. I don't need cascades. I don't need Japanese gardens. I need my muse, I tell you! Where is she? She can't be in that bar. She doesn't frequent bars and nightclubs. This woman is *not* my muse! She is too fat and too small. My muse is tall. Didn't you see her go away? She is tall, isn't she? Her eyes are black, not blue! This woman is better, but she is not my muse. She is better than the one you showed me before, but she is not inspiring either. Take away this moon! Take away these roses! She might be on the beach right now. My muse likes the Black Sea. She thinks her eyes reflect the Black Sea even when she bathes in the Nile. Take this crocodile away! I've no intention of shooting a horror movie. I'm not a film-director. This barn is *not* the *Cinecitta*. Who are they? I've no intention of shooting a detective film. I'm a poet, I tell you! I can't prove it because that man hasn't memorised my poem. Yes, I composed a poem five, six, seven minutes ago. I've no other alibi. I stayed in this barn. I composed a poem. I didn't write it down. I improvised it. That man heard me. There was a woman in here. She'll confirm what I'm telling you. She left. She is my muse. You can always call on her to vouch for me. Find her, please! She stayed with me in this barn. She couldn't have committed the murder. She was sitting over there, next to this man in a short-sleeved shirt. I wouldn't have created the poem if she hadn't been in this barn. Why should I kill a child? I'm not interested in little girls. I'm not interested in little boys. I never rape children. I don't even rape old women. Children are the token of our immortality. Our Schopenhauerian *Wille* lives on in our children. Our deeds are carried on by our children and grandchildren. Our poems are written down and memorised by our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The poem I created would have been memorised by the

little girl you found dead in the barn. Not in this barn, of course. In *that* barn. What a pity she is dead! What a pity she didn't come to *this* barn. My muse is *not* a little girl. She is an adult. And I don't kill my muses. I've got two. The first muse was in here ten minutes ago, eleven minutes ago. The second muse lives at my place. I prefer the first muse. The other doesn't inspire me really. I haven't the courage to kick her out. I'm a gentleman, you know. Yes, I'm a poet. Yes, she is my girlfriend. Not the first one—the second one! The name of the first muse? Erato, I suppose. Or Calliope. Or Euterpe. Take your pick. I'm not joking. I was in this barn. Poets don't *always* go out in search of inspiration. Artists don't *always* kill in search of strong emotions. I'm not the Marquis de Sade. I'm Homer or Keats or Paul Celan. Not Sade—Celan! I promise to write an elegy. Put the corpse on that chair, please!

IN THE VERSAILLES PARK

A man was going to deceive another man. They stood facing each other and the future deceiver uttered a few noncommittal words to fill in the gap between the present moment and the moment of the deception. He did not know yet how to deceive the man standing opposite him, but he knew he had to hide his intentions as best he could. 'Otherwise my subterfuge won't come off,' he said to himself.

He did not utter these words. He just cast a sidelong glance at the future victim to find out whether the latter had read these words on his face—on the face of the former.

'Did my thought appear on my face?' The future deceiver touched his forehead. He felt nothing on his forehead except a few wrinkles and a bump, but that did not allay his fears. He was worried in earnest and tried his best to hide his discomfiture.

'Did he notice my gesture?' he asked himself, alluding to his victim. And he cast another sidelong glance at the man standing opposite him, beside a statue of Apollo. 'Of course he did. But did he decipher its meaning and aim? Did he realise I was trying to find out whether my thought had imprinted the word "subterfuge" on the pattern of my wrinkles? Did he notice the zigzag of the future deception in my gesture, in the zigzag of my gesture?'

He cast another sidelong glance at his future victim and pulled himself together. 'Did he notice my sidelong glance? Did he notice how I pulled myself together? I should have looked him straight in the face. I've nothing to hide. Of course I've a lot to hide, but I shouldn't let him in on my secret. Otherwise my subterfuge won't come off. Why did I use that word again? I shouldn't use that telltale word, otherwise it'll appear on my forehead like a brand. My thoughts are a branding iron, so to speak. I shouldn't speak at all. Not even to myself. '

And the future deceiver lapsed into silence. His brain also lapsed into silence. Nothing reverberated inside his brain—not a word, not a thought. 'How am I going to deceive him?' he asked himself at last, and these words reverberated through his brain with orchestral violence as if determined to betray him. 'Words are treacherous,' he said to himself. 'But I have to speak to him all the same, otherwise I won't deceive him. A gesture won't do. A wink won't do either. A wink is as good as a nod. Why should I nod? I must speak. I must tell him the whole story—my way! And then I'll shed a few tears to make him believe I'm affected and afflicted and on the verge of suicide. I hope he won't glimpse my smiling soul.'

And the future deceiver smiled unconsciously, absent-mindedly. And then the smile sneaked into his consciousness and he shuddered like a deceiver caught red-handed—in the act of deceiving a man standing opposite him. ‘He noticed my smile,’ he said to himself. ‘No doubt about that. I see my smile on his face, in the pattern of his lips. He smiles back. Or was he smiling before? Did *I* smile back, unconsciously? Is *he* going to deceive me? How? By smiling at me? Is it a deceiving smile? How does a deceiving smile look? Is it a crooked smile? Do crooks give their victims crooked smiles?’

The both exchanged a few noncommittal smiles. They did not talk. They just stood opposite each other and smiled disarmingly. They seemed to vie with each other for first place in the smiling competition. Then they stopped abruptly and their faces grew serious—too serious perhaps. They eyed each other with suspicion for a while. And then again they smiled disarmingly. And again they grew serious, dead serious. They accused each other of treachery. And they abused each other. For a while they showered abuse on each other, heedless of onlookers.

Then they calmed down a little and began to heap reproaches on each other.

‘You offended me by saying I was a traitor and a deceiver,’ said one of them.

‘*You* offended me by saying *I* was a traitor and a deceiver,’ said the other.

‘I’ll send you a letter of apology.’

‘I’ll send *you* a letter of apology.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Write it at once!’

‘I must be off.’

‘You won’t leave this park until—’

Meanwhile the gods frowned and smiled alternatively—all around the deceiver and the victim, along the main alley...

‘BEAUTY IS TRUTH, TRUTH BEAUTY’

Archaeologists are headstrong people: they never acknowledge their failures. They travel to deserts and dig holes. And the wind fills these holes with sand. And the wind fills the eyes of camels with the same sand and the camels forget their itinerary and fall into these holes and, unable to get out either by their own means or with the aid of the archaeologists, remain there forever. And the archaeologists abandon the holes filled to the brim with the sand and camels. And the archaeologists go elsewhere—to the desert unknown to camels and unfrequented by immoderate winds.

And they eventually light upon a suitable, hospitable desert and dig many holes in the ground. And they find nothing of course, but they are reluctant to acknowledge their failures—to acknowledge themselves beaten by oblivion and the toughness of the soil. And they throw vases and kitchen utensils into the holes they have dug in the desert and they go on throwing into the holes whatever they manage to lay their hands on until the holes are filled to the brim. And they ring up their managers. And the managers ring up journalists and photographers. And the journalists and photographers come to the desert and drive over to the archaeological site. They are given a warm welcome by the archaeologists who immediately lead them to the holes and point at the vases, kitchen utensils and other things lying in the holes. ‘Do you see anything?’ they ask triumphantly. And the cameras click for half an hour. As the photo-session draws to a close the vases and kitchen utensils are fished out and studied thoroughly by both the archaeologists and their guests.

Sometimes the archaeologists fail to persuade the journalists and photographers that their finds belong to the remote past and not to the tangible present. So they ring up their managers and implore them to get in touch with other journalists and photographers.

And if they fail once again, they build towns in their holes and then destroy these towns and show the ruins to journalists and photographers. ‘Do you think we built this town and then destroyed it for the sake of your newspapers?’ they ask maliciously. And the cameras click for two hours.

Sometimes the photographers’ bags remain closed: nothing clicks, nothing clinks, nothing clacks, nothing clunks. But the archaeologists do not give up. They travel to nearby villages and ask their inhabitants to come and live among the ruins. ‘We’ll rebuild the town for you,’ they

promise. And they fulfil their promise. Another town is built at the bottom of the hole. The new town differs favourably from the one that preceded it at the archaeological site: it is inhabited by grown-ups and their children. The children go to schools and become journalists and photographers. And the archaeologists dig a multitude of holes on the outskirts of the town and fill them with vases, kitchen utensils and clay figurines. And they show the holes to journalists, photographers and other inhabitants of the town. And the inhabitants of the town fish the figurines out, stare at them and eventually recognise themselves. 'Your ancestors,' say the archaeologists and the inhabitants of the town nod their heads.

But if sculptors go on strike and reveal the secret of the figurines, the archaeologists dig a multitude of holes. They build cities and open schools.

They dig away and reach the centre of the Earth. And at the centre of the Earth they stumble upon the skeleton of the first archaeologist lying beside an Etruscan figurine and a Grecian vase.

GAME-LICENCE

Children kill a lot of people during their games. These people are represented by dolls or other children or pedestrians. Children raise their toy revolvers and narrow their eyes to slits as if taking aim. Some pretend to be killed by non-existent bullets. Others go their way, unperturbed and light-hearted. They cross the streets, travel up and down in lifts and planes. All the while their wounds grow larger and larger. Bloodstains appear on their shirts and jackets.

They realise that these bloodstains have not been painted on their clothes by roguish and impish children. And they strip their clothes off and look through their wounds to ensure that the non-existent bullets did not shatter their hearts and lungs.

They realise that non-existent bullets are worse than ordinary ones, for they are omnipresent and omnipotent. Non-existent bullets cause no pain when they penetrate your body and prowl around it like wild animals.

A great many children raise their revolvers day in day out—in playgrounds, in schools, in parks, in the streets. Sometimes they do it in your presence and you smile and ruffle their hair or wag your index finger. Sometimes they hide behind trees and columns, like real cowboys. Sometimes they are just invisible or non-existent, like their bullets.

At night they kill you in their beds, in their dreams. They kill you with their revolvers, arrows, swords, machine guns and cannons. And bloodstains appear on your shirts, on your walls and in your books. And you press your hand against your heart. And you feel that your body is dead. Only your immortal soul throbs and palpitates in the last hours of your life.

And children run around you—in your room, in the streets. They do not hide any longer behind columns and bushes. They are visible and overbearing.

They run around you and mock you viciously. And they level their revolvers at you—playfully. They need not kill you now. They have killed you already. And they wait for you to agonise and die.

They snigger and giggle. And you turn around, following them with your glance and trying to catch them by the lapels of their coats. And you cannot help looking at them. You cannot help looking at your assassins. And they cannot help looking at you and laughing at you as they run around you in the streets, in the parks.

And they drown in the sea of your blood and other children come and mock you. And they run around you on the beach, scornful and mournful. They mourn you already. Yet you are still alive. And you are disdained and ridiculed by them, for you fail to defend yourself—to shield yourself from their non-existent bullets, to parry the blows of their invisible swords.

And the waves of your blood sweep them off their feet. And they spring up and fall and spring up again. And they continue their dances around your living corpse. They dance and dance around you with their flaming torches and knives. What game are they playing now? Is it the game of ogres? Is it just the game of death?

It *is* the game of death. And you do not play it properly. You are not a child any longer. And you have forgotten the rules of childish games. And you are dying in earnest.

And you die. You are buried and mourned. And you are raised from the dead. You find yourself in a maternity hospital and you become a child in the world of the future. And you run around the cities of the future which are made of glass or other diaphanous, invisible materials. And your parents offer you invisible revolvers and you load your revolvers with invisible, non-existent bullets.

And you kill visible pedestrians. And you kill your mother and your father and your aunt and your uncle. And you dance around their corpses, baring your teeth and brandishing the weapons of the past—the fashionable toys of the future. And you run and dance alone in your land.

TWO VOICES FROM THE DIM AND DISTANT PAST

‘The weather is fine today, isn’t it?’

‘It is. And yesterday it was fine as well. And our neighbour’s little cat is dead.’

‘Really?’

‘I liked their little cat. They must be very upset. I’m upset myself. You know, they’re like human beings, those animals. Cats and dogs. Don’t you think so? One can talk to them. They understand everything. I used to talk to my cat.’

‘Did you have a cat?’

‘He died four years ago. Such a nice cat. He was very obedient, as a matter of fact. Like a dog. And I had a dog who was like a cat. Very independent. She hardly ever came into my room when I called her. Sometimes she came, from time to time. But not always, like a cat. Apples are tasteless nowadays. Everything is tasteless. I recall the apples of my childhood.’

‘Do you like apple tarts?’

‘Not really. I prefer cherry tarts. ‘We should invite your neighbours.’

‘Should we?’

‘What do you think of them?’

‘I don’t know. I wouldn’t invite them every day.’

‘Do you find them boring?’

‘No, not particularly. But they are strangers. You *have* to talk to them. You don’t talk because you *want* to talk. And I like to talk *naturally*. You know, like breathing. Without choosing words. Like drinking tea on a terrace, something natural. The Chinese talked about it, Chinese philosophers. My son knows them better than I do. He read all the time, in his youth.’

‘Was he an obedient child?’

‘Yes, on the whole. Very quiet, solitary. He had no friends at school. Well, very few. But he liked school. He liked going there. And he studied a lot, physics, mathematics.’

‘I thought he was only interested in art.’

‘No, he wanted to become a mathematician. But then he lost a competition, something like that. He was very cut up about it. He’s rather sensitive. Even his skin is sensitive. He can’t lie on a beach, on a sunny day. He’s always been afraid of the sun. He doesn’t like beaches. He prefers woods, lakes.’

‘So do I. I’m afraid of the sea.’

‘And he almost drowned once, when he was a child. I saved him.’

‘How many times have you saved him?’

‘I don’t know. Two or three times. Not from death. From a different life perhaps. From a dangerous, ugly life. He might have been different.’

‘I’ll always love him. Even if he becomes different.’

‘Now it’s too late. He’ll always be what he is now. People don’t change, at his age. He’ll merely become older. Twenty years older, thirty years older. The same man, the same habits. Even now he can’t give up his habits. He loves this house. And his secret room.’

‘How many secrets does he have?’

‘Not many. I’ve got the feeling he tells me everything.’

‘Do you think he’ll be unfaithful to me?’

‘No. He’s never betrayed me, his mother. He’s always loved me. Not all children love their mothers. When I was a child I thought my father was my husband. I thought I would never have another husband. I thought all little girls were married to their fathers. And he thought he was married to his mother.’

‘He adores you. He always speaks about you. I’m a little bit jealous, you know.’

‘You shouldn’t be. I’m just his old mother. And you’re so beautiful. I’m happy my son has found you. In this life, in this world.’

‘You’re right. It’s so difficult to find anything in our world nowadays. Everything seems to be hidden. Whatever we are *longing* to find. We find other things, useless things.’

‘Sometimes even useless things may become useful, in the course of time. All depends on our attitude towards them. I like nuances more than substantial things. And one can always find nuances, colours.’

‘And I like important things, eternal problems. I’m Russian to the backbone. Questions of life and death.’

‘I don’t think life and death really exist. What exists is something in between. Something on the verge of death, on the edge of life. A colour, a nuance. A sound perhaps. A soft sound, an echo. Do you remember this story? It’s dangerous to smoke. It’s dangerous to drink too much wine. It’s dangerous to live because life leads to death, ends up in death.’

‘Yes. But it’s so difficult to give up smoking.’

‘And life of course. Even if we always live on the verge of something. On the verge of a revelation, not within it. Or on the brink of suicide. We can’t really have a walk in the woods. Who said that? Life is too short for a walk in the woods. What we *can* do is go to the nearest bush and hide behind it.’

‘From whom?’

‘I don’t know, from somebody. And then we remain behind the bush, for some reason. Rooted to the spot. We just have no strength to leave, to go somewhere. But our neighbours walk in the woods all day long. What are they doing in the woods, I wonder? Mushrooming? The Russians like mushrooming, I’m told.’

‘Yes, we spend hours and hours looking for them.’

‘Where do you find them?’

‘Where does one find mushrooms? Anywhere, in any wood? After the rain?’

‘Once I found a white mushroom like that.’

‘What’s ‘white mushroom’?’

‘A boletus.’

‘But do you like to *eat* them?’

‘Some of them.’

‘What’s Russian food like?’

‘Have you ever been to Russia?’

‘Only in my childhood. My father worked there, in our embassy. I adored Moscow. A wonderful city. And the river, and those merchant houses. But they destroyed a lot of them, apparently.’

‘Houses, churches.’

‘There are indestructible cities. And Moscow is one of them. They must have something like a soul, an immortal soul. Whatever happens. Doesn’t everything have a soul? I’m afraid my soul has grown old over the last five years.’

‘Don’t talk like that, mother.’

‘It is immortal of course. Immortal and old. Immortals are always old. In fiction. In Borges’ story, in Swift’s novel. Why can’t our souls be old? After so many incarnations? Old and dignified. And beautiful.’

‘Did you sleep last night?’

‘I dreamt a lot. I think I dreamt about you, but I can’t remember. I never remember my dreams, just fragments. Your hands, not your face. Your fingers. And I never remember my dreams from beginning to end. I always have the impression that dreams start somewhere in the middle. They never begin from the beginning, do they? And they never end. They’re interrupted. In a way, they’re immortal too. They might change bodies, migrating from one body to another.’

‘Your dream might be dreamt by somebody else, I suppose. Taking up where you left off. On the same night, on another night.’

‘What do they do in the interval? Do they fly somewhere? To the moon, to the stars? Imagine a dream staying at a hotel. Waiting for an opportunity to be born again into somebody’s sleep. To grow old in somebody’s mind.’

‘Do you think our dreams walk among us, in the daytime?’

‘Is my last dream sitting with us now, on this terrace? Sometimes I think that everything has a body, a human body. But we can’t see those bodies, God’s own image. I wish I could go dreaming, you know. Instead of mushrooming. Picking up dreams instead of mushrooms. After the rain? Where? In any wood?’

‘Are there dream woods, do you think?’

‘Perhaps. By the way, I often dream of woods, of my walks in the woods. Strangely enough, there are lots of benches in my dream woods. And you wait for me on those benches. And we talk. What do we talk about? About this terrace, about love. Nothing special. About children, my children.’

‘Do you ever meet *them* in your dreams, in your woods?’

‘Yes, sometimes. And I also dream of Moscow. And I talk Russian in my dreams. A poor imitation of Russian sounds.

‘Why don’t you learn Russian?’

‘I’d better brush up my ancient Greek. To re-read Plato in the original. Plato and Homer. I like the way the Russian language sounds. Like a song, a discreet, prosaic song. Like a black-and-white song. Do you hear any bird?’

‘No.’

‘They might have left the Earth, for all I know. They don’t recognise the Earth any more, I suppose. Smells must be different, everything. And they don’t recognise us, I imagine. Our

perfumes, our clothes. We do look ridiculous, don't we? Do they feel that we are talking about them?'

'I can see a bird, one bird.'

'It's not a bird, just a dot. In the sky.'

'But it's moving.'

'In what direction? Birds never fly North. Why should they? Do they feel like dying? They might think they've died already, since they don't recognise anything.'

'Do you think that's how this will come about? We won't recognise anything? All of a sudden?'

'Probably. There might be another earth. Slightly different. We always picture the other world in terms of our earthly ingredients. Better, slightly better. Or worse, much worse. Paradise and Hell. There are fountains, fruit. And saucepans, ovens. On the other side.'

'Do you think birds are immortal? Have they been created in the shape of the human soul?'

'There are no isolated phenomena in the universe. They must resemble *something*. Why not the human soul? Any soul?'

'Are they disembodied souls? Are they looking for suitable bodies, in the North?'

'Why not? Why should everybody live in the South? I don't like the sun and beaches. And deserts. There are deserts in the North, the deserts of snow. The snow-deserts. I wouldn't mind living in a snow-desert, in a warm country house.'

'Drinking tea all day long.'

'Do you want some cognac?'

'No, thank you. Some people like tea with cognac. In Russia.'

'Really? They drink a lot in Russia, don't they? A lot of tea, a lot of cognac. And vodka of course.'

'Vodka goes well with smoked fish.'

'And with sadness, Russian sadness. And with despair, anyone's despair. We all are Russian. And Chinese, and Indian. We are everybody.'

'And birds? Do we have anything in common with them?'

'Of course. We can fly and sing. And write poetry. Any flight is a poem, any picture. A Chinese miniature. I think I was Chinese in one of my former lives.'

'And your eyes? Why don't you look like a Chinese Empress?'

‘Or a Chinese philosopher? You shouldn’t go by appearances. Our faces are but reflections in a lake. The reflections waiting for the wind. And then everything becomes different, all of a sudden. Everything.

THE THIRD POLICEMAN

A policeman stopped me and gave me a lecture for making a U-turn. I never argue with the police. So I thanked the policeman for his lecture and drove straight on.

In a few seconds I was stopped by another policeman who told me I should have made a U-turn before the intersection—and he pointed towards the crossroads he had spoken about—because it was a one-way street and I was going against the current, as it were. I looked back but the first policeman had disappeared already and, under the circumstances, it would have been unwise, I reflected, to rely on his testimony to prove I had followed his instructions. So I thanked the policeman for his lecture and made the belated U-turn. (We all have to make U-turns now and then. We cannot drive straight on forever, down the same street, along the same tramlines of fate.)

I made the U-turn and drove past the intersection. I heard a whistle and saw the first policeman who signalled me to pull up. I followed his instructions and he walked over to my car. He asked me why I had not driven straight on—as far as the frontier.

‘What frontier?’ I asked. I never ask questions when confronted with the police, but this time I just could not help myself.

‘Why didn’t you drive straight on?’ he asked.

I realised he was preoccupied with his constabulary duties: my curiosity about the frontier would have to wait. So I had no alternative but to look back in the hope of finding the second policeman who might get me off the hook. I saw him and shouted for joy.

‘Are you shouting for joy?’ asked the first policeman.

‘I am.’

‘What are you so joyful about?’

‘I saw the second policeman,’ I said.

‘You didn’t shout for joy when you saw *me*.’

And he gave me a lecture for being silent at the wrong moment. I apologised for my silence, thanked him for the lecture, made another U-turn and drove towards the second policeman. I told him the first policeman had insisted I should drive straight on as far as the frontier.

‘The frontier is right here,’ said the second policeman, pointing to the white line painted on the cobblestones.

When I raised my eyes I saw a gigantic white painting which had replaced the cityscape beyond the frontier.

‘What’s your opinion of my painting?’ asked the policeman, brandishing a paintbrush. ‘Do you understand the world now? It’s nothing but frontiers and white squares. There are two policemen in it. And one car.’

‘And one driver,’ I said.

‘You’re a policeman, the third policeman. Only policemen can dream of the police, U-turns and one-way streets.’

I looked back. The first policeman had disappeared, replaced by a series of white squares.

‘Only Malevich can dream of white squares,’ said the policeman.

But I did not wake up. I was probably dead. I might have perished in a car crash.

ERDA! ERDA! EWIGES WEIB!

I met Elisabeth at a cocktail party. I reached for a glass of champagne. She reached for a glass of champagne. Our hands collided, our glasses tilted and the champagne spilt onto a carpet. And then our heads tilted too.

My mother, whom I apprised of our union, fell victim to the charms of my companion during a tea party. My mother probably let herself be impregnated by her voice which, though liable to be marred by the hubbub of big receptions, sounded in a half-empty room like the bird leading Siegfried to the sleeping body of Brünnhilde—the Sleeping Beauty, in choreographic terms.

My mother blessed us, somewhat ceremoniously, and in the evening, on our way to the opera house, she told me in a soft voice, ‘It’s your last chance. Don’t miss it, I implore you.’

My mother’s words continued to echo in my ears not only throughout the opera—was it *Lohengrin*?—but even after her departure for Italy.

‘Why the last chance?’ I kept asking myself. I was not old at the time. Nor am I old now.

I am not ugly either. I am a handsome young man.

Unable to resolve the problem, I hammered away on the piano that was going out of tune.

I adore my mother. She is an ideal woman.

My mother is the embodiment of human perfection. She is beautiful and wise. She is elegant and dignified. And under no circumstances can my mother utter a lie or say anything unfounded, groundless.

I knew that my mother’s words had a secret and sacred meaning—the Grail, in operatic terms. And it was incumbent upon her son—Parsifal—to discover what they meant.

I went in quest of the Grail and found it.

I realised that my fiancée was too inquisitive. She bombarded me with indiscreet questions. And she was a professional eavesdropper. She was determined to probe my life and my past to the bottom, whereas to my mind’s eye they are still unplumbed, unsounded depths. And to her they were nothing more than a vulgar chamber pot! And my future was a mere turd in that malodorous Victorian artefact.

She was no Sleeping Beauty.

Only my mother can act and talk pointedly. And she always gets to the point!

I maintain that the betrothed couple should consciously or unconsciously, of a common accord or individually, draw a circle beyond which neither of them is allowed to trespass. She trespassed into *my* circle—not once, not twice but many times and for many days. I felt somewhat like a hostess who is compelled, about midnight, to rustle up some food for an unexpected guest. And the food I provided for her was my thoughts, my emotions, my personality. I was Prometheus, she the eagle.

She *lived* within my circle.

She showed her true colours when she admitted that she knew me better than my own mother. She insulted my mother and I decided to kill her.

I asked her to sing *Isoldes Liebestod* every two hours.

There are husbands who betray their mothers with their wives. I am not of their number.

Tonight I shall commit suicide, like Tristan.

My mother was right. As always.

THE FIGURE IN THE TAPESTRY

She was less in demand now. She used to be worshipped and flattered even by usherettes who usually begrudge famous actresses their fees and flowers.

Now she received no flowers and no fees. Sometimes she would find a rose on her bed, but she always flung it out of the window for fear of being pricked or poisoned or both.

And she had no money. She could not even afford a piece of cheese and therefore felt more despondent than the crow from La Fontaine's fable. She subsisted solely on bread and candy. No wonder she grew thinner and thinner until she was as thin as a thread—an ordinary thread used by tailors and weavers.

'I am as thin as a thread,' she used to think: she was fully aware of her plight and her thoughts grew even thinner than ordinary threads. 'I wish I could fall into the hands of a weaver who has woven the tapestry of the universe on his loom. I might ask him to mend the universe by means of my body and soul. Perhaps I am the only thread liable to mend the universe. Perhaps I am the only thread he needs to mend it.'

Many times she endeavoured to squeeze and slide into the eye of a needle but every time she failed, being dreadfully long-sighted. 'I've never been able to do it, even with ordinary threads,' she sighed.

In desperation, she used to fly on the needle like a witch on her broomstick and idle strollers would make out her silhouette—her body and soul—above the battlements of the city, up in the sky, among the clouds.

She would mend the sky, chasing away the clouds and the zigzags of lightning bolts. And soon the clouds would vanish like the snows of yesteryear—somewhere in Siberia or Alaska—and she sang a beautiful song and played Ophelia's part again. She drifted across the sky, singing and whining:

*His beard was as white as snow
All flaxen was his poll.*

And eventually she drowned in the sky.

And on her bed there appeared four garlands: a garland of crow-flowers, a garland of nettles, a garland of daisies and a garland of long purples.

Thunderous applause resounded in heaven for hours and hours. As a matter of fact, it was a drawn-out clap of thunder.

IN THE END WAS THE WORD

He got up, walked to the rostrum and addressed the assembly. He read out the first page of his speech, dropped it on the floor and looked up. He received a tremendous ovation and looked down again, satisfied and emboldened. Another sheet of paper was lying before him and he picked it up. He read it out and dropped it on the red carpet that somebody had rolled out by his feet.

The carpet was piled with paper. He realised that he had been talking for hours—for a whole month perhaps. His speech palled on the audience and he was aware of it. But he continued to read out the sheets of paper lying within his reach, near a glass of sparkling water: he had nothing else to do. The members of the audience dozed off and fell asleep, but he continued to read and drink and fill his glass with soda water. The members of the audience slid off their chairs. They did not wake up and remained on the floor, snoring loudly. He realised that his speech had crossed the frontiers of their shallow dreams, lulling them to sleep, conveying them to another, deeper layer of sleep which was impervious to his speech, to its duration and boredom. He realised that they did not hear him now, but he had gathered sufficient momentum and could talk to himself, inspired by his own patience and perseverance. He continued to talk to himself, fell asleep, sank down and finally stretched out on the carpet, next to the rostrum. But he continued to talk in his sleep: he was a vocal somnambulist. He talked and talked, keeping everybody present in a state of deep sleep. Those who entered the hall in search of their relatives or in order to make speeches could not help listening to him and soon fell asleep themselves, sprawling beside their relatives or enemies.

Many years elapsed. He continued to talk. His listeners died, but he continued to talk, for he was indefatigable. He talked in his sleep and a crowd of insomniacs gathered around him, hoping to heal their chronically awakened minds. They recovered and passed away in the hall choked with skeletons.

And a crowd of immortal gods gathered around him. After a while they passed away with Buddhist acceptance and Hindu equanimity.

HOMAGE TO BORGES

Don Quixote was a failure-prone knight and in the long run his failures proved to be his victories. Many people tried to repeat his minus-exploits in the hope of becoming immortal or at least famous.

One of them rode on his horse up to a windmill in the Dutch city of Leyden, mounted a sail and soared and circled through the air. A police helicopter descended upon the windmill and the unfortunate imitator of Don Quixote was conveyed to the nearest police station.

Another imitator climbed on a television transmission tower, perched himself on its top and struck up a conversation with the clouds and winds. Nobody believed he was emulating Don Quixote's exploit. At best he was taken for an imitator of Ibsen's master builder.

Another imitator took to climbing up the façades of various houses and was often mistaken for Harold Lloyd by moviegoers and film-directors. The crowd would gather on the sidewalk and applaud his mountaineering skill and Lloydian head for heights. Once an envious actor pointed out that the climber was unlikely to get the leading part in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. But, on the whole, the crowd was always full of admiration. What disturbed some defenders of privacy was the fact that the imitator peered indiscreetly into the windows past which he was climbing. They did not know he was looking for a broken-hearted damsel at whose window he might hang himself by the wrist in order to enact, if only in part, Chapter 43 of the novel. But all the damsels he had come across during his up-and-down wanderings were happy, lucky and light-hearted. 'I'm fine!' they shouted from their sofas and despondently he would climb towards other windows.

Another imitator stayed in bed for two years. He limited his aping of Don Quixote's life to perusing chivalric romances and slashing the air with his sword. He also claimed to have the same dreams as his idol.

Another imitator spent two weeks in a wooden cage. He was mistaken for the hunger artist—the protagonist of Kafka's short story—and nobody gave him anything to eat in spite of his entreaties. He starved to death, unable to persuade the people around him that he was Don Quixote.

Another imitator spent two years on various aeroplanes that he afterwards described as flying horses—a fanciful interpretation of the chapter *The Flying Steed*. He was mistaken for an old-fashioned poet in need of inspiration.

Another imitator re-wrote the novel and became Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Carrasco, the Duke, the Duchess, Dulcinea del Toboso and Cervantes himself.

Another imitator found a man whose looks did not differ much from the portraits of Sancho Panza with which the various editions of Don Quixote are peppered. This new imitator of Don Quixote proposed to the imitator of Sancho Panza a long adventure—an endless journey through Europe.

They travelled across France, Germany and Luxembourg until 1993. Don Quixote rode a horse, Sancho Panza an ass. Don Quixote did not try to storm windmills or fight duels with those who dared to blacken Dulcinea's image. He did not even accept the challenge of the Knight of the White Moon when the latter barred his way somewhere in Luxembourg. He imitated none of Don Quixote's failures. He contented himself with tumbling from his horse—on Fridays. In remembrance of Robinson Crusoe.

LA FORZA DEL DESTINO II

The other day, for some reason I was reminded of the Soviet plane which for a while shook the Western world on account of the technological innovations incorporated into its wings, among other things. Whenever this plane touched the surface of the Earth, the citizens of such and such a country would rush towards it in the hope of touching its materials. It was said that any contact with its wings, however precarious and superficial, might bestow upon you an honour or a gift thanks to which you would be able to fly through the air and also through the cosmos, both visible and invisible. And one student swore on his mother's head that every morning his cousin flew at a height of 9,000 metres. 'He has to fly thousands of miles every year for his job,' he added.

Anyway, the plane under discussion – whenever talking about airplanes, you should say *above* discussion – continued to shake the world for several months. And then it shook it (the plane shook the world) in a different sense: it shook it upside down, so to speak. Suddenly the joystick wrenched itself from the pilot's grasp and the plane obeyed the order issued by the steering wheel. As a result, the plane crashed into a mountainside or into some other fatal, mortal, weird side. As we all know, in this business, new products often crash and burn, but that plane seemed to be beyond crashes, let alone burns. Its constructor used to say to his colleagues, 'I don't exclude the catastrophes that habitually occur in accordance with God's will, but my plane will never burn. It may crash now and then – into hillsides and mountains, as the case may be. But it'll never burn.' So, whenever his colleagues saw a burning plane, they said, looking at each other, 'Do you know what kind of plane is burning under our very eyes?' And they answered their own question, 'Whatever plane we're meditating upon at this very moment has nothing to do with our constructor's masterpiece.' And they never took the trouble to check what plane they were alluding to, without naming it, so that they were not prepared for the real, shake-the-world catastrophe which shook the Earth too: the Earth is always shaken when a plane crashes into its side and mind. (What a pity our fellowcitizens firmly believe that the Earth is mindless. While taking advantage of her body – on some beach or other – they say to each other, 'The Earth is mindless, mindless – it is bodyful, on the other hand.')

But all this is beside the point; at least to some extent because what counts in this story – in all stories, to tell the truth – is humanity, the human factor or just love, friendship and death

related to human beings. The plane in question was not wholly automatic; nor was it a pilotless drone overloaded with bombs. It was a plane loaded with passengers among whom there was a stewardess. Of course she was not really a passenger, being part and parcel of the crew, but that is another story. The story I am about to tell was focused on love and destiny, for the pilot was in love with the stewardess. Both were rather beautiful, but the stewardess was not in love with the pilot, contrary to what might have been presumed, given the powerful, muscular physique of the latter. Frankly speaking, almost everybody was in love with the pilot, down to other pilots, other men. Oddly enough, the stewardess was rather impervious to the pilot's might and charisma. And let us not discard his intelligence: he knew by heart many poems in Russian and also in French. And yet the stewardess was insensitive to both his French and the poems he recited to her during their interminable flights.

One might say he was fed up with the situation, with his own predicament based on hopes, expectations, waiting, and other characteristics of defeat. So one afternoon, before boarding the flight he was to protect from tragedies and bloodshed, he asked her if she did not mind marrying him in the near future. 'I'll give you the answer after the flight,' she said. Destiny took up where she had left off, for the truth was not in the pilot's favour, as might have been presumed by those who know that, most of the time, destiny is linked to death and not happy endings and Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*.

The joystick worked itself loose and the plane began to lose its prerogatives. No longer was it able to fly from point A to point B; nor was it (no longer, no longer) on an equal footing or winging with birds. In short, it shook the Earth and destiny won yet another game. And yet some of us might think it *lost* this game: it all depends on your point of view, on your angle of vision. If you think that human life is far more important than love, you can affirm it out loud, 'Destiny won the game because its only purpose in life seems to be destroying human beings and their contraptions.' But you can destroy human beings in so many ways that love should not be overlooked offhandedly, nonchalantly; in the present case, among other cases. I mean the story I am engrossed in is multifaceted. The answer our pilot would have heard after the flight was, 'No, no, no. I'll get married next week. Another man will be standing by my side on that unforgettable morning. Not you, not you.' Well, destiny lost the game because it might have destroyed the pilot psychologically, spiritually and mystically: he would have lost his faith in God. And such a loss is much more painful, tragic and lethal than materialistic death. Of course one might say (and one

does say this quite often), 'Life is so long you'll have enough time to fall in love once again and find your God in the course of your pilgrim's progress.' And what if the pilot had committed suicide, after hearing the verdict?

THE FIRST MELODY

What mood, what state of mind gave rise to the first melody? Let us imagine a caveman who, standing on a hilltop, calls out to his invisible friend several times in succession. His friend neither answers the calls nor returns to his native cave, having lost his way in some jungle or other. At first our caveman is worried and consequently his shouts grow longer and louder. Suddenly he starts paying attention to his own voice, to his shouts, to the way he cries in the wilderness. He forgets his lost friend for the sake of the melody he composes by opening his mouth and producing the sounds that differ in pitch and tone.

Our caveman might also have created his first melody out of joy—upon seeing his friend return from the jungle. Or out of despair, out of solitude.

A FEELING OF GRIEF

You can observe your grief in a piece of music. ‘This piece of music echoes the grief I felt last night.’ It also works the other way round: ‘My soul seems to echo the Chopin *Nocturne* I heard last night.’ And you feel your grief differently when hearing a piece of music attuned to it. What is more, your grief alters in accordance with the melodies and harmonies you hear: at some point you may wonder whether you *feel* your grief or merely *hear* it. In the same manner one can *see* one’s grief in a painting. And one can *read* one’s grief in a poem, in a short story. Or one can read one’s grief *into* a poem, *into* a short story. One can even *touch* one’s grief by caressing a piece of sculpture. A feeling of grief, a feeling of love. They can also be conveyed through painting, poetry, cinema. Rooted in reality, these arts distract attention from the truth.

The memories rising to the surface of my consciousness as I tie and untie my shoelaces have little in common with what Proust’s hero feels in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*—for the simple reason that my shoes and fingers have a different past, a different network of associations. Music bypasses the past and the chaos it leaves in its wake. Music knows a shortcut to our hearts. I am pretty sure I would have understood and shared Swann’s feelings had I listened to Vinteuil’s *Sonata* in his company, in Madame Verdurin’s *Salon*. Or even far from her *Salon*—in my room, in another century. Music is beyond Space and Time.

BROTHERS

I don't like this man. If somebody asked me why I don't like him, I would answer, 'I've no idea.' I admit I dislike him—what I feel might be described as 'soft hatred' or 'psychological allergy'—but I have no idea *why* I harbour this feeling towards this man.

He is so insignificant that I am sure I shall forget him as soon as he goes out. But he does not go out. He still stands in front of me and I cannot help writing about him for the simple reason that his presence is rather conspicuous. You often write about what you see in front of you. And I see *him*—not a landscape, not a piece of old furniture.

I see his face, his eyes, his shoulders, his legs or rather his trousers—his baggy trousers. And I feel I don't like him. Yet I like his trousers. I don't like the man who wears them. To tell the truth, I don't like him at all, which is pretty strange, considering that I like the way he dresses and gesticulates.

I have no idea what my negative feeling is founded on. Perhaps my dislike of him is entirely without foundation. I might even like him if I did not dislike him. He is handsome and the way he talks does not jar with my own notions and ideas. And he seems exempt from the shortcoming so common among intelligent men and women: he does not seek to force his ideas on everybody.

He does not even ask me whether I agree with what he says. If he asked me this question I would certainly answer, 'Yes, I agree with you.' But he does not ask me this question and I continue to dislike him. Do I dislike him because he does not ask me this obvious question? Do I ask myself, 'Is he presumptuous to the point of assuming that I agree with whatever he says?' No. I don't ask myself this question.

I don't think he is presumptuous. And even if he was presumptuous or pretentious or haughty or vainglorious, I would not dislike him for *this* particular trait of his character. The origin of my dislike lies deeper and its roots are much longer. I like his face and manners and what I dislike seems to lie beyond them—beyond his physique and breeding.

I don't even know whether my dislike is located within his personality—inside his body and psyche. What I dislike may be linked to something he touched ever so slightly many years ago. I don't even know whether it was an actual touch or just a thought. I don't know whether he took part in the event I dislike so much. Perhaps he was a mile away, two miles away. Perhaps he

was in the middle of nowhere when the event took place and became part of human history. I don't even know what event I am talking about. Perhaps it was not an event, properly speaking. It might have been something insignificant, like the man himself. It might have been vaporous, translucent. I don't even know whether it was an event or a solid substance or just an idea.

I like his ideas—at least I like his present ideas. Of course he might have changed ever since the event—let us call it 'event' for the sake of argument—took place and spread around our globe. He might have become different, quite different. But the fact that I dislike him *now* proves he has changed very little—very little indeed, for he must keep something which reminds me of the event I dislike so much.

I wonder if I don't dislike someone he is connected with right now. I mean, his wife or his father-in-law. For instance, if his father-in-law were Mussolini or somebody of that type, I would dislike him intensely. I mean, I would dislike Mussolini's son-in-law.

His father-in-law is not Mussolini—no doubt about that. Of course I don't know his father-in-law. I don't even know his father and mother. But I know his father-in-law is not Mussolini. And his own father is not Mussolini. And his mother is not Mussolini's wife. I don't even know whether his mother is still alive or not. I don't even know whether his wife is dead. I don't even know whether he is married or single. But I know my dislike is not rooted in his wife or mother.

I seldom dislike women. If somebody asked me, 'Why?' I would answer, 'I am a gentleman and a womaniser.' Even the most insignificant woman has something to offer. Sometimes a smile, sometimes a voice or a dozen beautiful words, sometimes a foot, a stocking. Perhaps if he had come to this room in the company of his wife or mother I would have taken a liking to him—to *him* and not to his wife. To him *and* to his wife, to be exact. His mother must be pretty old by now.

He came in alone. There is nobody beside us in this room. And he still stands in front of me. Why doesn't he go away? Does he want me to find out what I dislike in his body and mind? Does he want to assist me in my psychological investigation? That is very kind of him. And he does not talk much. He allows me to think, to analyse his psyche, his ego, his hidden personality—in short, his unconscious. But he forbids me to listen to him.

I hear his breathing. I don't hear his words. And his words are part and parcel of his personality. He might betray himself by uttering irrelevant or revealing words. Should I ask him to talk as much as possible? Of course my dislike lies beyond his words, but I might trail them

and their echoes to their hiding place, to their origin—to his thoughts. Perhaps he does not say what he thinks. Why does he talk so little, I wonder? Does he analyse me in his turn? I don't like his inquisitive glance.

A CUCKOO IN THE NEST

‘Why don’t you understand what I’m telling you?’

‘Because you haven’t told me anything yet.’

‘I am your father, am I not?’

‘So what?’

‘Shouldn’t you treat your elders and betters with more respect? Take your hat off!’

‘With all due respect, Father, I don’t subscribe to whatever you say.’

‘Don’t you? And what have I said, may I ask?’

‘Nothing. But if you do say something, I won’t automatically agree with you.’

‘I didn’t say you should agree with me *automatically*.’

‘You did.’

‘Don’t contradict your father!’

‘You said that half an hour ago.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Last week—’

‘No.’

‘Perhaps last month. I can’t remember exactly.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Last year?’

‘No.’

‘When?’

‘Never.’

‘What *did* you say then?’

‘I said you were entitled to voice your own opinion.’

‘From time to time.’

‘From time to time.’

‘On condition that my opinion matches your own.’

‘Well, I’m your father after all. You must have some of my genes. What are you insinuating, Daniel?’

‘You *are* my father, I suppose.’

ELSEWHERE, NOWHERE, EVERYWHERE

There are people who cannot live on the surface of the Earth.

Some of them can live only in the air. They buy balloons and fly upward. They remain in the air for a few hours, laughing and drinking champagne or beer. They even get married in the vicinity of the stars but sue for divorce, once their flights are over.

There are people who can live only under the surface of the Earth. They loathe space and light. They spend most of the day in cellars, reading Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. They read the book several times, pick up a pen, arrange a few sheets of paper in front of them and embark upon their own *Notes from the Underground*. 'There are too many people on Earth and they never miss an opportunity to insult us. They insult us at close range and from a distance. Space does not protect us—on the contrary, space exposes us to their glances. And space swarms with their insults. Space itself insults us. And the sun illumines our shame. And we cringe from the moon.'

There are people who can live only on other planets. They either jump like kangaroos or crawl on all fours, unable to cope with gravitational pull. They breathe with open mouths or do not breathe at all. They always look for non-existent flowers and mushrooms. And sometimes they speak non-existent languages. They are prone to say 'l' instead of 'r' and vice versa. And they are always on the lookout for alien spaceships—for aliens in general. They collect shooting stars and wait for a meteor shower to wash themselves and their clothes. They give an impressive number of long-distance calls but hang up immediately, frustrated and furious. They read books on astronomy and write their own books in which the Earth is not mentioned. And if the word 'Earth' should creep into their writings, they erase it.

2.

There are people who cannot live at all. They jump like kangaroos and crawl on all fours, they walk and run along the streets, they journey through the air in balloons and planes, they swim and dive in the Atlantic, they sleep and awaken in their beds and also in other people's beds and bedrooms. But they do not succeed in overcoming the disgust they feel twenty four hours a day. 'I am disgusted,' they write in their diaries. 'I am disgusted,' they write the following morning. 'I

am disgusted,' they dictate on their deathbeds. 'I am disgusted,' is engraved in gilded letters on their tombstones.

HITTING THE BOTTLE

‘Not the first bottle in your life.’ This is how they talk to incurable drunkards in detoxification centres. As soon as their clients come in, they say, ‘Don’t be afraid. We’ll let you drink as much cognac as you wish – but on one condition. We’ll keep track of the empty bottles.’

There is a blackboard on the wall opposite and you look at it as you empty one bottle after another. The image you contemplate is as follows:

$$1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+$$

The uncanny feature of this unfinished equation (=death) is to be found at the end: ‘+’ as if you were bound never to stop, even *after* your death. It is said that sight is more significant in conditioning our attitude towards life than taste and even hearing, although I draw much more delight from music than from paintings, sculptures and even solitary trees that all look like the Tree of Life. When you see your consumption in an equation, even if no one puts death at the end of it, you are frightened out of your wits, skin and so on, for mathematics calculates your death-oriented itinerary and your position on the map of life with pinpoint accuracy.

You array the empty bottles on your dinner table or on a Louis XV chest of drawers, and at some point you say to yourself they are full as if you were a full-time optimist. You see these bottles in front of you and at some point it no longer matters if they are full or not, for bottles exist for your representation: from them you can draw your pleasure at will, after opening them two hours beforehand. So you just pour some wine into your glass and bring it level with your nose and lips. And your representation joins the glass, after leaving the innermost recesses of your mind. You also indulge in the contemplation of the colour (dress) of the wine you have chosen. Your representation is a rainbow from which you pluck whatever colour you set your heart upon on the spur of the moment. On the spur of that moment you chose the colour usually associated with the wines of Pomerol which happens to be your favourite Claret, on account of its proximity to human blood. You do not always think about Christ at such moments because a shudder may traverse your body to accompany this parallel which should necessarily come to the fore in a Church or during a period of meditation carried out in a monastery, in your private cell. Of course you are supposed to live with Christ, and whatever red liquid you drink (even a glass of

tomato juice) cannot help but bring his image up to date, so to speak. I am not sure that Kierkegaard who thought the Crucifixion was always in his body and room, made any allowance for its occasional disappearance. Suppose it does disappear from time to time and so, sooner or later, we shall have to update it, to bring us to speed with its intensity, with its life and death in time.

Anyway, the bottles are still on your favourite chest of drawers and you begin to drink them, if you feel like it. Of course a nurse you are likely to encounter during your detoxification stay in the clinic will say maliciously, ‘You always feel like it, you scoundrel,’ but this is the worst method often employed by unprofessional employees.

At this point a professional nurse gratifies you with another bottle and to your astonishment you realise that the bottle she put on the chest of drawers is full, not empty, not illusory. You open it, pour some wine into a glass and begin to smell it. After a while you put the glass down: to your horror or amusement, you do not feel anything. And you say to the nurse and also to the doctor, ‘From now on I’ll drink only empty bottles. They’re more spiritual, in my opinion.’

This is the third method employed in the establishment under scrutiny. But we should not forget the figure-covered blackboard, for on it relies the second method used by doctors and nurses. Not all their patients are as spiritual as the one I have just dissected – thanks to him I recalled the bottle-game – and so the blackboard may come in handy, when a patient keeps asking for real bottles, revolted by their presence in his room. So the same nurse – there must be only one nurse in this establishment – brings him yet another bottle and says, ‘Not the first bottle in your life.’ Then she puts another bottle in front of him and says, ‘Not the first bottle in your life.’ She picks up the piece of chalk, and even if the patient does not look at the blackboard, he knows what she is about to do with this piece of chalk. ‘How many bottles have I drunk already?’ he asks her. ‘Please have a look at the blackboard,’ she says as she performs an inviting gesture.

$$1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+$$

‘What? What? What? What?’ he exclaims. ‘It’s an equation,’ she answers. ‘What’s an equation?’ he asks. ‘A mathematical statement in which you show that two amounts are equal using mathematical symbols.’ ‘Where’s the second amount?’ he asks. ‘The second amount is death,’ she answers. ‘Only death?’ he asks. ‘Not quite. You’ll also be offered a bit of Hell with lots of

fire.’ ‘A huge fireplace?’ ‘If you wish. But you won’t be drinking any cognac in front of this fireplace.’ ‘Do you mean to say I’ll *repose* inside it?’ ‘That’s right. But I wouldn’t place a lot of hope in this prospect, if I were you.’ ‘Will you put another +1, if I drink this bottle?’ ‘I will.’ ‘Can’t you relinquish this procedure for the sake of my eternal soul?’ ‘It is for the sake of your soul that I will *not* relinquish it.’ ‘Then I won’t drink it.’

Another outcome of their methods might display a certain quantity of love, obtained through the bottle-game and its communication cord. You rotate the bottle, you follow avidly and impatiently its movement and final position which connects you with lips and hearts, souls and love as such, love in itself. And this last variety of love is related to everyone and everything: whatever you can light upon in this world of ours is a relative of love, either poor or rich. And it does not really matter, for Christianity mixed the opposites many centuries ago and we do not really know whether we are allowed to become rich and prosperous, in spite of the moral support that Protestantism is said to have offered to commerce and finance. (St Francis has been turning in his tomb ever since Martin Luther’s advent and theses.)

The bottle comes to a standstill, points to a man or a woman, and you kiss this man or woman on the lips, on the mouth, on the gums and even on the tongue as if to contribute to the beauty of the forthcoming speech. Sure enough, the ritual includes short speeches, widening the scope of predestination, of the bottle’s actions. So, after kissing the man or the woman abundantly (to your heart’s content), you let them embark upon their speeches which may last as long as a quarter-of-an hour. In their speeches, the men and women thank their respective destinies for the honour bestowed upon them. They say their game is sure to blossom into love. ‘Anything can blossom into love,’ they add. ‘You go out in Moscow or Siberia and realise your body is frozen stiff. You enter the nearest hut, find a man or a woman in it and you cuddle up together, trying to get warm. After a while, you do get warm, but that is only the first stage of your Siberia-induced initiation. After all, the gulag is not the only institution one can visit in Siberia and other parts of Russia. There are matrimonial institutions in that distant and hostile country. So you get warm and suddenly an irresistible urge knocks on your consciousness’ door – let us put it this way. Alchemists always speak of doors that should be either opened or shut. For instance, at the very beginning of an alchemical process you should remind yourself that the Philosophers’ Stone isn’t obtained through the operations of vulgar chemistry but by simple digestion with the help of the philosophical fire. So you shut the door through which their vulgar

chemistry always penetrates your Arcanum and open the one associated with the Stone you are yearning for. Incidentally, the warmth you feel in your body and soul and also in your partner's company is tantamount to the philosophical fire on which I may enlarge, if you allow me to pursue my analysis of this exceptional human relationship.'

The game goes on, but it seldom leads to sexual abuse: there is something platonic in the atmosphere reigning in the course of this game, in the room where it takes place. The participants are inclined to discuss philosophical problems, and even if they are eager to interrupt the speeches that last too long, in their professional opinion, they do not mind devoting their precious time to time and space, to the fifth dimension and the unity presiding over every turn of the bottle, every gesture, however tiny and irrelevant. Their discussions are often vague, floating, misty, mysterious. Be that as it may, engrossed in memories and games, the patient whose consumption of alcohol stopped for a while might feel like resuming his enjoyment of the elixirs arrayed in front of him.

There are several methods, several schools and one of them allows you to drink as much whisky as you want, provided you cover a blackboard with figures that might remind you of death, of cirrhosis of liver. And if you categorically refuse to write anything, not even a farewell poem, a nurse may come in, pick up a piece of chalk and add another bottle to the equation unfolding on the blackness of your night. In the long run you cannot bear it any more, and you express your disgust and dread through a series of screams that resound all over the clinic. Even those who fiddle with empty bottles at the other end of this establishment cannot help pitying you as they say to their bottles, 'He can no longer enjoy you, you know. And I feel like drinking another of your comrades who looks even more promising than you.' But whatever your state of mind, sometimes you have a change of heart and resolve to stop drinking, if only for three hours: being on the brink of death, you feel duty bound to honour the Holy Trinity at every opportunity. You do not necessarily talk to your bottles, although no one forbids you this innocent exercise designed to improve your 'communication cord'. Actually you are wholly occupied elsewhere – in the domain which is also related to bottles, but blissfully disregards their propensity for idle chattering. You focus your taste buds and nose on the inner quality of the wine you are about to drink, putting aside the social aspect of your relationship. You might even say to yourself that your bottles would not appreciate this chatter, thinking you mistake them for mere humans, for

your colleagues in whose company you can drink some beer in the nearest pub or café de commerce.

THE SIN OF COMMISSION, THE SIN OF OMISSION

His voice carried little conviction. He did not believe what he said. I could not bring myself to tell him: ‘Why do you talk like that? Do you want me to believe you? You seem to mistrust yourself. Why do you talk at all? Why do you talk with such persistence? Save your breath!’

I stood silent by his side and watched his breath issue from his mouth and vanish into thin air. Soon the air grew thick with his breath. He was still talking in spite of everything. He tried to persuade me that he was right. He tried to persuade me that his arguments carried weight with potential sponsors. I listened to him. I did not speak myself. I did not say: ‘You’re wasting your time. Your breath has already forsaken you.’

There was no breath left in his lungs. I saw his lungs and there was no breath in them. He was breathing spasmodically. The air did not enter his lungs. The air shied away from his lungs. ‘I warned you,’ I was tempted to say. ‘You shouldn’t have lied to me. Telling lies doesn’t pay at all.’ I did not say anything.

There was a void around his mouth. His voice was resonant enough to prevail upon the void. His sound waves reached my ears.

‘I can hear you, but I’d rather not hear anything,’ I thought. I continued to listen to him. And I nodded my head several times—out of politeness.

He suffocated and was dripping with sweat. ‘Our sponsors,’ he said, pointing upward. I looked upward and saw nobody. He lied once again. ‘Our sponsors,’ he repeated. According to my calculations, these were the last words he could utter. It is considered improper to remain inactive in the presence of a corpse. I walked over to the piano and pulled a huge coffin from under it. The coffin was so huge it could house not only the speaker but all his lies as well.

I dragged the coffin over to his feet and looked up. He seemed on the point of telling another lie. ‘Enough is enough,’ I said. I think I said it, but I am not sure. ‘Our sponsors,’ he said at last. I am sure he said it. He upset my calculations. ‘You weren’t supposed to say anything,’ I said. I am sure I said it. ‘What?’ he asked. ‘Stop talking!’ I shouted. I think I shouted the words into his face. And he stopped talking. He was a liar—no doubt about that. But he was an obedient liar.

He stopped talking and died. I did the rest. I even nailed the lid on.

The weight of his lies now lay on my shoulders.

SLUDGE AND SHINE AND ASHES AND STONES

I have interviewed many people on the subject of life – the only subject worth talking and writing about. I put to them two questions only. These are the answers I get in the course of my interviews.

‘The ice of the lake was breaking up into floes.’

Few people understand what life is about. And those who have discovered the meaning of life do not vouchsafe to answer your questions clearly. They give elusive answers. They utter enigmatic sentences. It is hard to break ice with them.

‘The hero was mortally damaged by the supernatural fallout.’

What hero? Do they allude to themselves? They do not seem to be damaged, either physically or psychologically. What fallout? What on earth do they mean?

‘We are forced to rake through dead ashes.’

This is clear enough and needs no comment. Many people have died ever since the Creation and our shoes rustle through their ashes, figuratively speaking. Even our thoughts rake through their ashes. And our aspirations. And our great expectations.

‘Life is a stopgap.’

A stopgap between two eternities, two chasms? Why does God need this stopgap? Do *we* need it?

‘Pay no attention to the outer world of shine and sludge!’

I am daunted by the spiritual strength of those who shut themselves away from the world and devote their lives to meditation and prayer. Do our anchorites understand what life is about? I agree that our world is composed of shine and sludge. But if you pay no attention to the sludge, you will never enjoy the shine. And you will die before being born.

‘I don’t know why you keep on at me.’

No comment.

‘Life is tailor-made for us and for us alone.’

Many people suffer in our world. Their lives are not tailor-made. Their lives are not even sold in supermarkets. Their lives do not even rot in rubbish bins. Their lives do not even rot in sewers. Their lives are not even sewer rats.

‘Life serves as a foil to the afterlife.’

Or death serves as a foil to life. I think my axiom is more logical. And yet I do not understand anything about life.

‘There’s something afoot.’

Do they allude to the Second Coming? Or to the Third World War? Or to the Third World and its invasion of our world? Do they merely allude to their own deaths? Or to the forthcoming marriages of their sons and daughters? These people seem to understand life in all its plenitude, for there is always something afoot in our existence. Everything is afoot. Life is afoot. It never remains at the same spot for more than an instant. Life is unpredictable on account of its movement. What power or force moves the rotating Earth? It is life! Moreover, life is a living image of time. And time is always afoot, so to speak.

‘I won’t allow myself to get sidetracked.’

I asked a question about life. What can one think about except life and its ramifications? What does ‘get sidetracked’ mean in this context? Suicide?

Some people do not bother to answer my questions. They go their ways, splashing through the sludge of life. Their forefathers’ ashes rustle under their shoes, but they hear neither the past nor the present. Nor the future. Do they fear death?

Even stones are dying. Do stones fear death? Do *they* know what death is about?

LONG-DISTANCE REVENGE

1.

She took to frittering away whole days in bars. She had nothing else to do. She had loved a man. He had forsaken her. A tragic story, a commonplace tragedy. *She* might have forsaken him. He had beaten her to it. After his departure she took to drinking.

She was a beautiful woman. A lot of men struck up conversations with her. She always answered 'No' and they smiled bitterly. They departed and waylaid other women or played other games in other bars. She played the game of solitude.

She felt humiliated and wished to avenge herself. But the man who had forsaken her lived in another state and she was allergic to distances. In her scheme of things, the world was now limited to one square mile at most. And there was no room for personal revenge within this square mile. Yet there was ample room for revenge upon the male of the species.

She drank gin and tonic while looking at other men. She was choosing her victim. In the meantime she missed no opportunity to avenge herself upon the male of the species by saying 'No' to every man who tried to make her acquaintance in the bar. She felt relieved, and yet she realised how incomplete, insignificant her revenge would have appeared to the man who had loved and betrayed her. She knew he would have been disappointed. And she had no desire to disappoint him. 'Not now!' she told herself, knocking her glass back in one.

There was a large choice of potential victims. And all these men shifting and shuffling around her did not mind becoming the victims of her nasty mood. They silently implored her to torture them.

She was waiting for a man who, by his stature and personality, might remind her of the traitor. And as the traitor was unique, according to her love-suffused recollections, she hesitated and procrastinated, letting the men play billiards and swill whisky all around her inert and fatigued body.

2.

Thirty years elapsed. The men in the bar were old, shaky and sulky. They bore no resemblance to her former, ever-youthful companion. The newcomers were young, but they belonged to another generation. Their manners and voices were different. HE did not talk like that. HE did not drink

like that. HE did not play billiards like that. HE did not play billiards at all. HE was an intellectual and read books. They had read books together. 'Why did I come here in the first place?' she asked herself, knocking an empty glass over. 'Nobody has ever looked like him in this bar. He belongs elsewhere. I should have gone to a library, thirty years ago. There's a library nearby. He went there every other day. It's not far from here. I'd have met him there. And I'd have killed him there and then. Now it's too late. I'm old now. I'm not the woman he left. The pistol is the same, though.'

THE ONLY SOLUTION TO IDENTITY PROBLEMS

In his letters he left blanks for all the words he did not dare write down. There were a lot of blanks in his letters.

He loved women passionately, but there were gaps in his love. He would press his hands against his heart for five minutes, singing an aria from *La Traviata*. And then he would silently stare into the distance for hours and hours, his arms dangling before him like a chimpanzee's.

Some said he was diffident by nature. 'There are gaps in his courage, not in his passion for women. He can't look straight. He lowers his eyes whenever a woman appears in front of him. Even if she stands at the end of his nose for two days, she won't see his eyes. His very nose might withdraw from her gaze.'

Whenever he directed his steps towards women, he stumbled on the way. He tripped over roots and carpets. He seldom approached female bodies.

Some said he was an invalid, alluding to ear infections and vestibular nerve endings. 'He makes detours. He can't help it. He deviates from his course. He falls into bear pits and cesspools. And he can't reach the end of a sentence without getting sidetracked. And whenever he broaches the subject of love, he stammers—he trips over the roots of words, so to speak.'

He discussed this subject before friends and relatives. He even wrote love letters to the women he did not love. And the women he was in love with received only blank sheets of paper. He could not bring himself either to write such letters or to sign them.

Some said he did not know his real name. 'He was brought up in an orphanage. He was christened of course, but always refused to sign his letters with his artificial name. "Names do count," he says now and then. "If I had a real one, I'd use it." He is a lover of Proust. And an assiduous reader of the Kabbalah.'

He never introduced himself to anyone. He was loath to introduce somebody else instead of himself. Moreover, he did not even know whom he would introduce by uttering his artificial name. Generally speaking, he was afraid of names. He maintained that all names were artificial.

Some said he avoided calling a spade a spade. 'He asked us if we were sure Adam had called a spade a spade. And he went to his tool shed and showed us a spade to make sure we understood what he was talking about. And then he threw the spade out of the window as if doubting his own words.'

‘If only I could have spoken to Adam,’ he said once.

And he wrote a love letter to Eve. And he signed it: ‘Adam’.

THE HAT

There was no room in her suitcases. No room for a hatbox, that is. Her hat would have fitted. Two months later, when about to leave for Russia, I wrapped this precious object carefully in tissue paper and put it in my suitcase. Don't imagine for a minute I would have been so disrespectful as to put her hat in my pocket. I should have put it in a hatbox, though. So two months later I brought her hat back to Moscow. There was no hot water and I was watching the bath fill up, trying to get used to the sight of cold water. Suddenly I heard shouting. You often hear shouting in Moscow and they are not shouts of joy. So I burst out of the bathroom, fleeing to the rescue of my maiden in distress. She held out her hat. 'How silly of me! How could I have trusted you with my hat? Look what you've done!' I did not understand. 'The rim...' I still did not understand. 'The rim has been flattened. You've destroyed a work of art! I shall never be myself again!' And she daubed a spot of make-up on her cheeks to hide an alcohol-induced flush.

MOTHER EARTH

1.

It is a day of great celebration. People embrace in the streets and cry for joy. Men throw their hats up.

A plane appears in the sky. The people applaud. The hats are thrown up so often that they remain suspended in mid-air. Multitude of arms are raised in ecstasy. The people long to grasp the plane and pull it down. They grow impatient. There is too much air in between the plane and the crowd. The people breathe deeper and faster so as to lessen the quantity of air separating them from their hero who looks down and smiles while drinking a glass of champagne. The crowd cannot see his smile but the hero sees the crowd perfectly, in minute detail. He can see everything from where he seats on the plane: the hats, the arms, the tears of joy. He drinks the champagne and talks with a stewardess.

The plane goes down. The crowd seems on the point of flying up. The people's arms look and flap like wings. The crowd is prepared to meet and celebrate its hero in the clouds. It is no longer necessary. The plane touches down on the runway and, instead of flying, the crowd makes a dash towards the airport. The meeting will take place on the surface of the Earth—not in the clouds, not on Venus. 'But he'll tell us what he saw on Venus,' says a man to his wife. And his wife repeats these words to her cousin and her cousin repeats these words to his little daughter. And the crowd begins to chant: 'Tell us what you saw on Venus, tell us what you saw on Venus...'

The hero descends towards the crowd and the crowd raises him up again: he does not belong on the surface of the Earth. He must always fly upward—towards Venus and Mars, towards Saturn and Pluto. The people toss him up. He seems to fly in the clouds. He seems to fly towards Venus.

They carry him shoulder high. As they push their way towards the Palace of Astronauts they cheer and chant: 'Tell us what you saw on Venus, tell us what you saw on Venus...' And he tells them what he saw on Venus, but the uproar of the curious men and women drowns his words out.

2.

In the Palace of Astronauts a huge orchestra plays a potpourri of popular tunes that succeed each other with amazing rapidity. 'The way it's done on Venus,' explains the conductor.

The hero reaches the rostrum and says a few words: 'Venus', 'the Earth', 'thanks'... A thunderous applause interrupts him. The applause goes on for a quarter of an hour. A few balloons fly upward and adhere to the ceiling. 'Open the roof!' yell the crowd. 'Let them fly as far as Venus!' The roof does not open up. The shouts become more persistent and rhythmical. Young and old chant as they thrust their arms towards Venus: 'Open the roof, open the roof...' Shooting breaks out. Bursting one by one, the balloons plummet down.

3.

Two days later, an old man said to a young man, 'He wasn't on Venus.'

'How do you know?'

'He didn't tell us anything.' The old man shook his head.

'Didn't he?'

'And the balloons—'

'What about them?'

'Did you see the balloons?'

'Of course I did.' The young man nodded and gazed up.

'They fell down. They didn't fly to Venus.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's a bad sign. It's a bad omen,' said the old man.

'How do you mean?' repeated the young man. He looked surprised and annoyed. He was planning to build a house on Venus. His plans seemed to have been shattered by the old man's hypothesis.

'Do you hate the Earth?' asked the old man.

'Of course I do. Don't you?'

'We'll never go to Venus.' The old man crouched down and sniffed the Earth. He pulled a face and straightened up. 'There's no escape. We're no better than the balloons. We can only fly up as far as the roofs of our houses. But we're doomed to fall down and lie supine on the Earth, in the Earth.'

‘I’d rather live on the roof of my house,’ said the young man, stretching his arms towards the Moon.

‘Would you like to live on the Moon?’ asked the old man, gazing up. ‘I’ve been to the Moon twice. Its surface smells marvellous.’

‘I don’t care about smells.’

‘Because you don’t breathe.’ The old man arched his neck backwards, plucked a rose, sniffed it, pulled a face, threw the rose up into the air and fell down.

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

He seems to take a perverse delight in worrying himself. He thinks his wife has left him and yet she stands by his side and strokes his hair. 'You've left me,' he says. 'I've left you,' she repeats. She does not want to contradict him. He flies into a fury whenever she contradicts him. He has a heart attack whenever she disagrees with him. Being worried does him a lot of good.

She says, 'I'm leaving you,' and goes to the door.

He says, 'She opens the door and leaves me.' And she opens the door. 'Don't leave me,' he says. 'I'll die without you.' And he pretends to be dying. He moans, he presses his hand to his heart, he collapses on the sofa. But he does not have a heart attack. Nor does he have a stroke. He just pretends to have a heart attack, a stroke and liver cancer. He just goes through the motions. She rushes towards him. He sits up and the whole scene is repeated once again.

He says, 'The war is inevitable,' and she reaches for a video-cassette: *War and Peace* or *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. He crouches behind an armchair that shields him from bullets, grenades and cannonballs. He peeps out from behind the armchair, watching the movies his wife shows him for the sake of his psychological equilibrium. 'How terrible!' he exclaims. 'How terrible!' she repeats, turning up the sound.

'The earth has been blown up,' he says, once the movie is over. His wife draws up the curtains and switches on the lights. 'Everybody has been killed.'

'Everybody has been killed.'

'And the sun doesn't shine any more.'

'No.' His wife extinguishes the lights.

'Do we have enough food in the fridge?'

'The air in the kitchen has been poisoned. The food has been poisoned too. They're using chemical weapons.'

'And atomic bombs. There are so many mushrooms in the air that one can go mushrooming.'

'Those mushrooms are poisonous. We'd better stay in this room.' And his wife reaches for another cassette: a western or a melodrama.

'People kill each other,' he says, hiding behind the curtains.

'They do,' answers his wife.

‘And they betray each other. There’s nobody on Earth except you and me.’

‘I’ll betray and kill you,’ says his wife. ‘And I’ll leave you,’ she adds for the sake of his psychological equilibrium.

He smiles. Anxiety spreads around his body like a wave and he likes waves. He likes the sea of anxiety. He often goes swimming in the sea of anxiety, in the river of fear. He often goes fishing in the river of fear.

‘Why don’t you fish me out of the river?’ he asks.

‘You like drowning,’ his wife says. ‘And you don’t like to be saved.’

‘But I like kisses of life.’ And she kisses him. ‘It’s not a kiss of life. It’s a kiss of death.’

‘Is it?’ She kisses him once more.

‘Why are you killing me?’

‘Women always kill their husbands. Besides, you like to be killed.’

‘You won’t have an opportunity to betray me.’

‘I’ll betray and leave you. And then I’ll kill you.’

‘From a distance? How?’

‘I’ll send you a mushroom.’

‘I won’t eat it. From now on, I won’t eat anything.’

She went to the kitchen. But he did not eat the lunch she had cooked. And he turned his nose up at the duck she had roasted for dinner. And he did not touch the scrambled eggs a few hours after. He was watching her.

‘Why don’t you sleep? Why don’t you eat?’

‘You might poison me.’

She hesitated. In the late afternoon she made up her mind at last: she preferred him to die from a stroke. ‘I won’t send you a poisonous mushroom,’ she announced.

‘You did send me a poisonous mushroom. But I didn’t eat it. I outwitted you.’

‘It’s not a poisonous mushroom,’ she said, pointing to the tin of caviar she had just opened.

‘It is,’ he said. ‘It’s a poisonous mushroom.’

He ate no caviar. He drank no champagne. He ate no oysters. ‘It’s Christmas today. It’s the New Year’s party,’ she insisted.

She put on *La grand bouffe*, but he did not look at the television screen. He looked at her. He watched her closely.

‘All right. I’ll betray you, but I won’t poison you.’

‘You’ve already betrayed me.’

‘But I won’t kill you.’

‘You’ve already killed me.’

JAPANESE POLITENESS

In the book on *Bushido* I have in my library – *The Soul of Japan* by Inazo Nitobe – there is a story or rather a comment on how the Japanese behave in everyday life – not in the context of a war. Of course *Bushido* is the unwritten code of laws presiding over the lives and conduct of the nobles of Japan, equivalent in many ways to European chivalry. So, upon opening a book on *Bushido*, one is immediately prompted to think about the knights and nobles of feudal Japan – of the samurai, the retainers of the daimyo. You have no idea what ‘daimyo’ means, but anyway you do not have many ideas related to things and the mysteries of the world. Plus one idea, minus one idea. Does that really matter? Let us proceed with the story I touched upon at the beginning of this paragraph which would be too long, if I devoted it to the *whole* story I go on touching upon as if there was nothing else to touch in this house of mine. I can go downstairs and touch one of my armchairs – or all of them. So what? I think it is better to touch upon the story I am hugging tightly to my chest; or rather, I had better kiss it once and for all.

You should visualise a building and say to yourself, ‘The building is particularly notable for its garden setting.’ You say this to yourself because you visited the garden five minutes ago, and given that it is very beautiful, you feel like spending some time in it. ‘You are out in the hot, glaring sun with no shade over you,’ says Inazo Nitobe and you have to believe him, otherwise the story cannot be told and enjoyed to the utmost. At least you have to suspend your disbelief, if any. If you do not have any disbelief at your disposal, just find some and suspend it – or hang it somewhere. There is such a thing as a hanging garden. Why not a hanging garden of disbelief?

A sunny day, hot weather. Say to yourself whatever you wish on condition that you keep the word (and the image) ‘hot’ within your field of vision and imagination. Whatever figment of your imagination you happen to use, this figment should contain hotness as such. So you are still out in the heat and a Japanese acquaintance passes by. The man or woman you see in front of you is not a mere passer-by and you realise that as you continue to look at him, at her and at the cherry tree growing beyond him and her. The tree is not far away; it could provide some shelter from the sun. Alas, you have no remote control and the tree remains out of your reach, within your field of vision. You accost your acquaintance and he takes his hat off. (No point in adding ‘or *her* hat off’.) Your hat is off as well and you hold your hats as you talk about politics. ‘After 30 years in politics, our local member of parliament is retiring next year.’ ‘He was a powerful

force in Japanese politics during the war years.’ ‘She has a degree in sociology and politics.’ ‘In the old days of two-party adversarial politics, voting was easy.’

You go on talking as if the sun had already gone into hiding. But you do not have to say to it, ‘Don’t hide your light under a bushel or beyond a cloud,’ for there are no bushels and no clouds in the sky. There are no bushes within it either. And your hats are still hanging from your hands. What is more, your acquaintance put his parasol down – at the very outset of your talk. According to the Americans, he ought to have said to you, ‘You’re in the sun. The sun is blazing hot. Do you know that too much exposure to sun ages the skin? Of course you do. So do I. I would willingly invite you under my parasol if it was large enough. It is not and consequently I can’t offer you shade. I’ve no alternative but to share your discomfort and discomfort.’ Instead of making this short speech, he continues to talk about Chio-Chio san – San, Sun? – who entered politics after a career in banking. And what about you? You say to him, ‘Joe San is very active in left-wing politics.’ Why don’t you make a short speech instead? ‘Please hide yourself under your parasol. Of course it’s not large enough for two friends, but you can protect yourself from the sun with this parasol of yours. Why not use it? Don’t mind my presence. You haven’t seemed to mind my absence over the last eight years. Please put up your parasol and make yourself comfortable – we don’t stand on ceremony here.’ And what if he answers you, ‘I’m all right. I’m not sweating’? Then you can answer him thus: ‘Someone who is suffering from sunstroke feels dizzy and has a high temperature, but doesn’t sweat.’ You can also say to him, ‘What about that tree over there? Shall we take shelter inside its hospitable shade?’

Nothing of the kind is likely to happen if you are in Japan, not far from Kyoto. You will go on talking to your friend or mere acquaintance without taking notice of nearby trees, hats, parasols, Americans and other tourists. Seven years ago I was also privileged to attend a wonderful performance of what may be called *The Tragedy of Politeness*. Two Japanese men were talking to each other in a Japanese garden. One of them was holding a hat and a parasol. I have no idea what they were talking about, but you do not need to study Japanese to watch a man sink to the ground. One man sank to the ground; so did the other man. Were they sweating? I wonder, I wonder. So much for Japanese politeness.

LES PAS SUR LA NEIGE

Love, love. Music speaks of love. What is love? Nothing, nothing. Composers speak of nothing.

Why do I listen to music? Why do I listen to *Die Zauberflöte*? Does it console me? Not at all. It makes me feel forlorn and wretched—especially the fugue in the overture.

A dozen icicles hang and drip from the eaves of my house. I listen to the music of my Winter Palace. What does this music speak of? Nothing. Nothing. This music speaks of nothing.

This music doesn't console me either.

Writers create their works out of nothing. Out of love, as it were. They love words. They love their wives and children. And they write novels about their wives and children. About their lives, about their loves.

Why should I read their works? They don't write about *me*. They don't even write about my wife because I have no wife. They don't write about my family. Some children they describe are lovable and might become my sons and daughters, but I am not married. And my children will not be born out of wedlock!

The women they describe in minute detail do not appeal to my senses. I would not have married them. Is it my fault or that of the writers? Are the writers to blame for my loneliness? They could have written about a woman I might marry. They must hate me. Did I wrong them? Why do they bear a grudge against me?

'They lived happily thereafter until death parted them.' Whoever they are, I remain in the margin. And it is cold in the margin. It is as cold as charity.

The people next door clink their champagne glasses. I cannot help overhearing their cosy chit-chats. 'I love you.' 'I love you.' Their vocabulary is rather poor and hackneyed. And their feelings are trite. It is not even a love-hate relationship. It is an old-fashioned love. They speak of nothing. They have nothing to say.

They live happily and do not trouble themselves about literature.

And I listen to the music of their voices.

‘Don’t let me go,’ said she.

‘I won’t let you go,’ said he.

‘Only death will part us,’ sighed she.

‘Even death won’t part us!’ cried he.

I hope I shall live long enough to prove him wrong.

May he plod in the snow of my margin!

May he listen to the music of my margin!

OLD WOMEN WILL SAVE THE WORLD!

Usually old women serve as a foil to younger ones.

A group of old women sit on a bench, talking about olden times, former lovers, masked balls and bunches of roses. And male pedestrians take no notice of them. (Sometimes the old women strew roses over their heads and clothes in order to remember youth and death, cocktail parties and cemeteries.)

An ugly young lady comes along and the male pedestrians begin favourably comparing her with the old women who continue to talk on the bench, nodding their heads in rhythm with their thoughts. (A thought pops into an old woman's brain from nowhere and soon falls with a thump, making the old woman nod her head. Sometimes the same thought keeps popping in and out, and the old woman shakes her head instead of nodding it. So she does not doze off. On the contrary, she spends a sleepless night, shaking her head and complaining about young women.)

And the male pedestrians shuttle their eyes from the ugly young lady to the old women. They shift their eyes back and forth, all the while comparing youth with death and death with youth. Gradually the features of the young lady acquire harmony and sensual lustre.

An ugly young lady seldom goes out without her grandmother. The ugly young lady does not mind being late for her appointments. 'A beautiful woman is never punctual,' she thinks with a disdainful toss of her head. 'She doesn't leave me alone,' thinks the grandmother. The thought pops in and out. The grandmother shakes her head until the thought falls asleep or dies a natural death in her unconscious. 'My thought has died. I'm still alive,' thinks the grandmother. 'Why am I alive?' she asks herself, but the question does not form a question mark. All it can do is stand bolt upright in the middle of her brain like an exclamation mark or a soldier on guard. 'Did I love a soldier in my youth?' This new question too is as stiff as a ramrod and even her amnesiac doubts fail to bend it into an interrogative form. So she opts to dismiss her doubts on the grounds of their non-existence. She gives a nod of recognition and smiles ecstatically. 'It's you,' she whispers. And she tells her granddaughter the story of her juvenile love.

But for old ladies, our world would have been ugly.

But for old ladies, the Unknown Soldiers would have been forgotten. Their numerous tombs are still strewn with roses.

ARCHANGEL URIEL AND YOUNG FAUST

I met a stranger downtown. He invited me to a nearby bar and offered me a glass of beer. As I waited for the foam to collapse upon itself his eyes investigated the innermost caves of my ego and I was relieved to learn that I had a heart of gold. ‘He was looking at my heart,’ I said to myself and he heard these words.

‘I *was* looking at your heart,’ he echoed my stream of consciousness. ‘Even outdoors I saw it gleam through the mist and rain.’ The stranger peeked out of the window. Dying of curiosity, I got up, opened the window and leaned sideways. As I glanced upward, the sun shone out rather promisingly. ‘It’s your heart, not the sun,’ explained the stranger. ‘Your heart radiates both light and heat.’

‘I’m generous and warm-hearted,’ I said out of politeness. I was reluctant to contradict him. Perhaps I *am* kind and warm-hearted. And bountiful, and gifted, and sincere, and pure.

‘Your heart *is* warm,’ he agreed. ‘It’s red-hot, I daresay. Nothing in the world would make me touch your heart with my bare hands. God forbid!’

‘You’d better put on gloves.’ I was in a joking mood.

‘But the rest of your being is cold,’ he declared pitilessly, whereupon I caught sight of a few snowflakes scattered over my trousers.

‘How did they get there?’ I asked spontaneously.

‘You didn’t close the window. Anyway it’s pointless. The snowstorm is inside you.’

‘Why don’t they melt away?’

‘They originated in the deep-freeze of your ego. And human snow neither melts nor evaporates. Your lungs are full of ice. And your intestines are an icy road in the heart of Siberia. As a matter of fact, your heart is marooned in the heart of Siberia. For all its heat waves, your heart is powerless against your frost.’

‘The heart is the seat of love,’ I objected. ‘All other organs are its subordinates. The heart diffuses love-energy throughout the human body.’

‘Let me quote Pope: ‘tis heav’n each passion sends, and diff’rent men directs to diff’rent ends.’ The stranger got up and raised his arms above his head, nearly touching the ceiling. ‘Heaven!’ he repeated.

‘The heart is a substitute for heaven in the human body. It is the throne of God—’

‘You presume too much! You usurp the prerogatives of heaven!’ The stranger sat down and ordered a bottle of whisky. ‘You don’t know yourself,’ he continued. ‘You’ve no idea what happens in your body. Your liver wages war against your heart. Your lungs attempt to strangle your heart in broad daylight, in the presence of your kidneys. Look! You’re gasping for breath!’

I was. ‘It’s stifling in here,’ I said apologetically.

‘It’s your lungs and your diaphragm. Your body has imposed an economic blockade on your heart.’

‘An air blockade against the Earth is being considered,’ announced the radio.

‘The Earth will have a heart attack. Because of you!’ The stranger was speaking at the top of his voice. ‘Double-dealer! Double-agent!’

Solemnly I rose to my feet and welcomed destiny with outstretched arms. My posture was reminiscent of androgynous Mexican statuary.

‘The man is the cosmos,’ I said. ‘The man is the Macrocosm or Atlas, if you wish. The man supports the universe.’

‘Heaven is above the cosmos, above the universe, above the man. Your heart reflects the Light of the Father. It is a particle of the Father. But it has been cast out into the spaces of the Shadow and the Void. Now it is outside the Fullness. Now it is a shapeless and formless abortion.’

I had no intention of contradicting him. I lowered my arms, sat down and noticed that the sun had shone out once more. Its rays reached my beer glass, whereupon I ordered a bottle of champagne.

The sky was dreamy and cloudless.

THE MESSIAH

He reads so ponderously that the book he holds either on his lap or in his hands grows tired of its own contents. And the story deviates from the text. And a parallel story appears. Another book springs into existence. And the books acquire shapes and colours which have nothing in common with their subject matters and styles. And their smells do not conjure up the images of the flowers mentioned, depicted or printed on their pages.

Soon he finds himself in a library where only one book can be found. But this book ramifies in all directions, all over the universe.

He holds an object in his hands. He holds it for a long time as if he was reading a book. He reads the thing that he holds in his hands. He seems to decipher the 'thing in itself', as Kant might have put it. He does it so ponderously that the 'thing in itself' loses patience and peeks out of its abode. And he looks at the 'thing in itself'. And he studies it ponderously, painstakingly. And the 'thing in itself' gets used to his sight. And it does not fear him, for one seldom fears what one is accustomed to. And he has enough time to study the 'thing in itself'. He studies its shape and colours and eventually appropriates it so that the 'thing in itself' becomes the 'thing for him'. And the 'thing for him' invites him in.

'There's no such thing as a thing in itself,' he declares ceremoniously. 'Everything is open. All we have to do is wait outside long enough to get inside.'

He walks much slower than other people. He walks so slowly that the road takes pity on him and shrinks to the size of a garden path. So he plucks up a rose and sits down on a bench. A butterfly flutters nearby. He gazes at the butterfly. His eyes begin to glow. Attracted by the light of his eyes and the persistency of his stare, the butterfly circles his face for a while and finally lands on his lips.

A great many insects and animals come to him and lie down by his feet or settle on his clothes. And he caresses their limbs and wings. And he talks to them.

Once he went on a trip round the world. He travelled so slowly, with such unbearable dignity, that the world grew weary of its own size and condensed into a crystal ball. He grasped the ball and gazed at it for a while. And the ball began to glow.

And he found himself on a garden path which led nowhere.

IN MEMORIAM

There were still two hours to decide what form our action should take with respect to what had occurred many years ago. We gathered in a huge living room and started to think. We were thinking in silence and only our hands, which rapped on wooden surfaces, produced the sounds we could hear. Isaac Karillo doodled on a paper napkin, tearing zigzag holes in it. I heard the sound of his pen and that sound distracted me from my thoughts the outlines of which, silhouetted against the general silence, had already become distinct in my brain. I had no idea whether those outlines corresponded to the form of our forthcoming action, but I felt exhilarated at the thought that something was on the move. Upon hearing the sound of the pen, I looked down and saw a figure that seemed a poor reflection of my thoughts. But when I tried to compare them I realised that my new thoughts—the ones interfering with the mental process intended to find a suitable form for the forthcoming action—had completely obliterated my former thoughts with which I desired to compare the figure on the napkin. I was about to air my disappointment when Issac Karillo got up and showed his drawing to everybody. ‘That’s the form our action should take,’ he said triumphantly.

‘How did you guess I’d been thinking along the same lines? How did you manage to copy the pattern of *my* thoughts?’ I asked accusingly. ‘By the way, the sound of your doodling interrupted my train of thoughts.’

‘Did your thoughts look like this?’ asked Robert Bickerman.

‘I think so,’ I answered.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Michael Florentin. ‘Can you see your thoughts now?’

‘I can’t,’ I admitted.

‘Did you see them a few minutes ago? Can you describe what you saw?’ insisted Joseph Kardina.

‘I’m not much of a talker,’ I said with a smile.

‘I could describe your smile,’ said Francis Brickner. ‘Do you think it looks like your recent thoughts? The magnetic field of this room is imbued with our mental efforts focused upon—’

‘You mean that, whatever we do—’ I began.

‘Precisely. Your smile must refer to our future action. Perhaps it is the form of our future action. And if I describe your smile meticulously—’

‘But his smile doesn’t look like the figure in the napkin,’ said Joseph Kardina.

‘His face is different,’ said Michael Florentin. ‘And his smile depends on his face. It’s part of his face.’

‘His face has nothing to do with our action,’ said Raphael Capio.

‘It does,’ objected Carlo Alphano. ‘His face is part of the magnetic field where we’re striving after the form of our action. Our thoughts are being influenced by his face. Our fate depends on his face.’

‘And his face depends on our fate,’ said a young man whose name I have no wish to write down.

‘It’s no joking matter,’ said Michael Florentin. ‘Our fate depends on what we’re saying now. Words *are* our fate. And they’re also our form of action.’

‘And what we’re saying now is not to the purpose,’ said Francis Brickner.

‘May I remind you that our purpose consists in finding a form for our forthcoming action,’ said our president whose name I am not allowed to divulge.

Our president did not call for silence, but nobody dared speak in the interval between the two sentences that he uttered in the course of the evening.

‘Let us study this drawing scrupulously,’ said our president at last and we all leaned forward to take a closer look at the napkin.

‘I trust this figure,’ said Bernard Laniado. ‘Did you draw it unconsciously?’

‘He did. Otherwise the word “doodling” wouldn’t have been uttered tonight,’ said Michael Florentin.

‘Our unconscious is far more intelligent than our conscious,’ said Bernard Laniado.

‘It’s hard to put this figure into words,’ said David Jessurun.

‘We might imitate it,’ said Carlo Alphano. He got up and struck a posture that bore a faint resemblance to the figure.

‘Do you suggest we all get up and pose like you?’ exclaimed Peter Lützens. ‘Is that what you call “action”?’

‘It might become the form of our action, not the action itself,’ answered Carlo Alphano.

‘Do keep in mind what happened last autumn!’ said Robert Bickerman.

We stood up in commemoration and remained silent for quarter of an hour. And then the silence was broken.

‘That’s the form our action should take,’ said Joseph Kardina. ‘Our memory is the form of our action.’

‘It *is* our action,’ said Robert Bickerman.

We lapsed into silence once again. And then Joseph Kardina gave a scream. Did he scream with pain? Did he scream with rage? Nobody asked him.

Issac Karillo raised his drawing above his hair and tore it up.

THE MUSIC OF A REBELLION

General plans for the rebellion had been mooted for at least six months before its outbreak so that the conspirators were confident of immediate success and resounding victory.

On the first day, however, the crowd was not responsive. Four revolutionary leaders stood on a balcony and spoke to the people assembled on a square. The leaders spoke and gesticulated so eloquently that their revolutionary spirit shone out in whatever they said or did. The crowd remained unresponsive.

‘Don’t you want to live better?’ asked one of the leaders.

The crowd did not say ‘no’. But the crowd did not say ‘yes’ either.

‘Don’t you wish to have more money?’ asked another leader.

A murmur rose into the air and even reached the balcony on which the revolutionary leaders shuffled their feet impatiently as they waited for a positive response from the crowd.

‘What did they say?’ the leaders asked one another.

‘Did you hear anything?’

‘A murmur.’

‘Did you hear “yes”?’

‘No.’

‘Don’t you ever say “no”! They might hear you! The crowd is an echo, nothing but an echo!’

‘Can you hear me?’ The question was addressed to the crowd.

Another murmur rose into the air.

‘Do you want to give your children a better education?’ asked the leader who spoke infrequently but to the point. ‘A fair supply of food, decent housing and health care!’ he vociferated.

‘Health care,’ said somebody in the crowd.

‘Decent housing,’ said another voice.

‘And a fair supply of food,’ repeated the leader. ‘And a fair supply of food,’ he repeated once again.

On the second day the crowd was even less responsive and no murmur rose from the square as the four leaders chanted slogans and sang revolutionary tunes.

‘There’s no echo today,’ said one of the leaders.

‘We should build a circular wall around the square,’ said another leader.

So they had a wall built overnight and on the third day the echo proved responsive and talkative. But the crowd remained beyond the wall.

‘Who are we talking to?’ ‘Who are we talking for?’ the leaders asked one another.

‘We’re talking to the echo,’ they answered in turn.

‘It’s easier to deal with sounds.’

‘It’s easier to become a composer than a political leader.’

Meanwhile the citizens marched through the streets, chanting, ‘We want to live better! We want to have more money! We want to give a better education to our children!’ But they chanted and waved their flags beyond the wall.

‘Do you hear anything?’ the leaders asked one another.

‘I hear myself.’

‘I hear *you*.’

‘I am the crowd.’

‘I multiply and replenish the earth!’

‘A fair supply of food!’

‘Health care!’

‘You forgot “decent housing”.’

‘Did I?’

‘It was *my* turn!’

‘Was it?’

‘It’s *my* turn now.’

‘Say something!’

‘Say something!’

THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

He had a lot of enemies in his lifetime and probably before his birth: their hatred seemed deep-rooted. Such hatred cannot arise within one's lifetime, he thought. And he was right, no doubt. No wonder I still have a lot of enemies, he thought despondently. Not in the Hereafter, though. On the Earth, in my native city. Even in the countries I never visited during my lifetime.

He was sitting on a stump: there are stumps in the Hereafter, not only apple trees and roses. There are lumberjacks in the Hereafter and they work day and night to earn their keep. Recently one of those lumberjacks menaced him with a laser saw and an X-ray axe, and he ran for his life without averting his gaze from the Earth.

He never averted his gaze from the Earth. He took no great interest in the Hereafter which he regarded as a gigantic motel: he had died in a car accident. He hoped that the motel was not a Corbusier-built Garden of Eden but a seed of the life to come. He even dubbed it 'the Herebefore'.

He relished the thought of returning to his mother planet in the shape of an archangel or a demon, which might enable him to confound his enemies—or their skeletons—with great panache and without much trouble. He would not mind leading a dog's life on the Earth: he used to bite people when he bore the shape of a man and was longing to pursue this activity during the next sojourn in the Thereafter. I don't mind biting and gnawing skeletons, he reflected as he shifted his gaze from London to San Francisco. Dogs like bones. Dogs must like skeletons. What span of life will be allotted to me by the chief banker of the Herebefore?

He had been a renowned composer during his last incarnation. In the long run his works had become ashes and dust so that critics decided to bury them at the art cemetery situated in the vicinity of Carnegie Hall. He could not reconcile himself to another death. Besides, he was dead tired and resented the idea of dragging around the Herebefore the mortal remains of his cultural heritage. So he endeavoured to rise from his ashes and resume his place among the illustrious composers of the past.

He bribed the best conductor of the other world into performing his only symphony twice a week at the largest hall on Jupiter. Moreover, this symphony was broadcast at peak time by the largest radio station of the Moon. The Earthlings did not hear it despite the proximity of the Moon and the broadcasting power of the radio station.

He went so far as to smuggle the recordings of his music through the so-called 'lifeline' in a famine relief convoy. But the living ate his symphony and numerous sonatas which had turned into potatoes in the course of the interstate trip.

He took the hint, hired a lorry and dispatched tons of potatoes to the Earth and also to the future. But the potatoes underwent no metamorphosis during the trip and were likewise devoured by the Earthlings and a few tourists from Mars.

In desperation he pelted the Earth with the notes he had plucked from his recordings and scores. 'It's raining today,' said the Earthlings. 'It's raining in torrents. *Es regnet in Strömen.*'

In a paroxysm of fury he pelted them with the chords he had plucked on an old guitar at the Imperial War Museum on Venus. 'It's hailing,' said the earthlings. 'Last night the hail battered on the windows,' wrote a newspaper. 'Violent rain and hail devastated the crops in Russia,' wrote Time Magazine.

He ended by throwing stones towards the solar system where a few inhabited planets resisted the summons of his musical genius. A number of meteors appeared in the nocturnal sky. They looked like the notes of a cosmic symphony.

The Earthlings and the Martians contemplated this score from afar and, driven by its visual beauty, attempted to perform it on their instruments. They ascribed it to God and saw in its harmonies the final proof of His existence.

Squatting on a stump, he listened with ecstasy to *The Stone Music*. The lumberjacks had departed and therefore nobody interposed between his face and the sounds radiating from the Earth and other planets of the solar system. With the passing of eternity, the whole of his face had become an enormous ear. I'm a musician, he told an archangel in vindication of his deformity. I'm a composer. Can't you hear?

GROWTH HORMONE

The teacher quickly put his ideas across to his students and the students noted them down in their exercise books. Presently they left the classroom and went home. For a while the teacher's ideas lay scattered around the city. For a while the teacher's ideas lay dormant in bedrooms and gardens. After a while the teacher's ideas grew active and irresistible. They put irresistible pressure upon the government. They sprouted roots. They sprouted between pedestrians and buildings. They sprouted between gravestones. The dead learnt those ideas by heart and propagated them in the Hereafter. And the gravestones became skyscrapers. And the skyscrapers began to budge. They walked around the city and killed those who did not share the ideas engraved all over their façades.

The corpses were buried and numerous gravestones covered the city. For a while the gravestones lay scattered around the city. For a while the gravestones lay dormant on boulevards and roofs. After a while the gravestones began to move, shifting the balance of financial and political control. Journalists detected a shift of emphasis. Politicians detected a radical shift in public opinion. The gravestones advanced upon the skyscrapers and razed them to the ground, wiping the teacher's ideas from the face of the Earth. But little boys climbed up trees and, using home-made catapults, fired stones at the gravestones.

The gravestones finally collapsed, trapping thousands of people. And these people shouted from under the debris, and their words began to bloom around the city like Baudelaire's flowers. They bloomed late into the autumn. And they did not lose their petals in the winter. And the trees in the parks were heavy with yellow blossom. And the trees were as evil as the flowers. And the people threw blossoms at each other as they walked around the city. And the trees began to move. As their branches spread around the people stampeded through the ever-narrowing streets to the exit. And the flowers got trodden on in the general stampede to the exit. But there was no exit.

A LOCAL CHARITY

‘Tell me about your life!’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘Come, come, there must be *something*—’

‘Nothing. My life is empty.’

‘Let’s ignore your remark as empty rhetoric.’ I smile cheerfully.

‘How shall I exist during the empty days ahead? I feel tired, nervous, empty and sexually frustrated.’

‘Indeed?’

‘I feel sexually frustrated.’

‘Can one be empty and sexually frustrated at the same time? And tired? And nervous? Sexual frustration takes up a lot of room in one’s body and soul, let alone nervousness and tiredness. As to the feeling of emptiness, it is renowned for its capacity to invade the human psyche to the point of excluding all other feelings, including—’

‘I feel sexually frustrated.’

The rest of the interview presented me with severe problems. She grabbed my hand and pulled me over to her lips. I dropped my notebook and kissed her lethargically. ‘I’m still sexually frustrated,’ she whispered. ‘And I’m empty, empty, empty...’

She pulled me over to her armchair...and her armchair turned into a rocking chair...and I rocked and rocked and rocked...and she lulled me to sleep...the old lady...and she wanted me to become her baby...and her husband...and her father...

They all pretend to be empty, these old women. I come to them, sit down and open my notebook. They stare at me. They complain about their lives and the world they live in. What is *their* world like? It’s empty, they repeat with stubbornness. And I am supposed to fill it. That is all I know about their world.

They call me ‘daddy’ as I leave their rooms. Or ‘grandpa’. Or they call me names, irritated by my rashness.

They are not even illustrious, the human wrecks sitting in their armchairs and devouring me with their weary eyes. Why should I interview them? Why was I designated to undertake these abortive missions? My editor calls the interviews ‘missions’. ‘Journalism is a mission,’ he says.

They are neither former actresses nor one-time dancers. They have never been either sportswomen or painters. Who are these creatures? I am given no opportunity to find out. The interviews end too soon, on the same pathetic note. The old women hold out their hands to demonstrate how nervous and empty they are. Their hands tremble and grasp the air. ‘I’m empty, empty...’ they whimper. I lean forward, out of commiseration, and they grasp my face or a sleeve of my shirt. So I get to my feet, trying not to lose my balance. And I inevitably lose it.

‘I haven’t finished the interview,’ I say to the editor. He smiles. Instead of scolding me for my lack of perseverance, he smiles and says, ‘It doesn’t matter, my boy. It really doesn’t matter. How many interviews have you left unfinished since I last saw you?’ ‘I’m not a professional journalist,’ I point out with disarming frankness. ‘It doesn’t matter. So much the better,’ he answers light-heartedly.

But I earn a high salary as a journalist. And I often get a performance bonus.

I have never seen a copy of our magazine at newsstands and supermarkets. Do they distribute it like leaflets? Do they have it printed at all? What can they print in this magazine of ours? Is it a woman’s magazine? Is it a magazine? What is it?

There are many people in this office of ours. They also interview old women. They are not professional journalists either, for all I know.

ZEITMASZE

He accosted me in the lobby of my hotel. An old man in his seventies. We exchanged a few letters, he said. And he held out his hand. Did we? I asked as I shook his hand. (His face did not look familiar.) Nine years ago, he said. We met in Brussels.

Why in Brussels? I asked as he ordered two cups of coffee. (I have never been to Brussels.) I've got a friend in Brussels, he said. And he fixed his eyes on *me*.

We talked about art. (What else can one talk about with old people? Not about death, I suppose. Not about life.)

He said he had heard a recording in his youth. In Brussels? I asked. A Scarlatti sonata, he said. (He was hard of hearing.) I wasn't hard of hearing in my youth, he said to dispel my doubts.

And then I lost the record, he continued. (He was telling a story.) I still remember the tune. Do you? I shouted. He began to whistle. I whistled in many shops, he said. Nobody knew the tune. I don't know it, I said. (My remark seemed to question the quality of his whistling.)

But I knew the tune, he continued. I even taught it to my girlfriend who was a stewardess. A beautiful stewardess. She whistled it too, all around the world.

Which of you found the record? I asked in the hope of effacing from his account all intermediate episodes. *I* did, he answered. In San Francisco, in a small shop. I whistled it and the owner of the shop—

He unexpectedly bared his teeth as he plunged his left hand into the pocket of his jacket. It occurred to me that he was smiling. Shortly afterwards my hypothesis was confirmed. He was smiling broadly, too broadly perhaps. Plenty of time, he whispered. Still plenty of time.

His face beaming with delight, he took a CD out of his pocket and offered it to me. A present, he said. Scarlatti, I read out.

I thanked him and put the CD in my attaché case. We talked for a while about record shops. They're not what they used to be, he said. They're too big and you can't talk to anybody about music. Nobody guides you. Shop assistants are not what they used to be. I'll tell you a story. In my youth I heard a Scarlatti sonata. Marvellous piece. I liked it very much. I still like it. Unfortunately...

And he told me the same story once again. (I did not interrupt him this time, shocked and softened by his sclerosis.) As it turned out, there were many intermediate episodes in this story of

his. He told me about the record shop on the Champs Elysées and an old Rumanian lady who never sold the records she disliked. This shop disappeared, he said. (The lady must have disappeared too.)

He told me about Central America and Bavaria. He told me about two girlfriends of his who whistled the tune at the North Pole. Did you find the record in Munich? I asked. In Los Angeles, he answered.

He plunged his left hand into the pocket of his jacket, but no smile disclosed his teeth. He produced the same CD and offered it to me in the same fashion. A present, he said. Mechanically I put it into my attaché case.

Twenty minutes later we returned to the subject of music and he said with a note of sadness in his voice:

Music is not what it used to be. You can't whistle it any more. Can you whistle a tune by Stockhausen, for instance? You can't, can you?

It's not worth trying, I said. (After his departure I did try to whistle one of Messiaen's works, but nothing came of it. I am not a bird, am I?)

He began to whistle. (I had expected something of the sort. I was not surprised.) He whistled for five minutes. He repeated the same tune so many times that I lost count and emptied my cup of coffee. Do you know what it is? he asked. I don't, I answered. Do you think it's a contemporary piece of music? he asked. I don't think so, I answered. You're right, he said. Contemporary music isn't so beautiful. Do you agree? I agree, I said.

This tune was composed many years ago by the Italian composer Scarlatti, he continued. In my youth, many years ago...

And he told me the same story. I was reluctant to cut his story short. I did not even ask whether he had found the CD in San Francisco or in Munich. I asked nothing. He told me everything. His left hand was hovering above his pocket like a bird of prey, not like a butterfly. His hand looked like a bird. So did his face. It was a bird's face, not a wolf's muzzle. But he did not fly away. He was sitting beside me, his hand grasping the same cup of coffee. And his lips continued to move without baring his teeth.

Finally he plunged his hand in his pocket, rummaged around for two minutes, showed me his empty palm and said in tragic tones, I've told my story three times already. It's time for me to go.

He got up and I followed his example. He dropped his cup of coffee and soundlessly it fell on a Turkish carpet.

Good-bye, I must be off, he said.

We shook hands and he departed.

I consulted my watch. Our conversation had lasted for almost an hour.

THE GRAND HOTEL

A baron comes to Greta Garbo's room in her absence, slips behind a curtain and peeps out. 'She might spot me,' he thinks as he extracts a cigarette case from his pocket. He puts one of the cigarettes between his lips and extracts a lighter from another pocket of his jacket. He lights the cigarette, inhales deeply, removes the cigarette from his mouth and begins to burn a hole in the curtain with its tip. Several times he interrupts this operation to verify whether the hole is large enough to afford him the view he is hankering after. 'No,' he says to himself, shaking his head despondently. A tiny quantity of the cigarette ash drops on the carpet every time he says 'no' to himself. There is an element of frenzy and desperation in the way he inhales the nicotine and other poisonous substances before applying the tip of his burning cigarette to the half-finished hole. And since he inhales those substances rather often, unsatisfied as he is with the dimensions of his made-to-measure peephole, the quantity of the poison stored up in his lungs augments alarmingly. He might die before Greta Garbo comes back to her room. Luckily for him she cancels her engagement and is already on her way back to the Grand Hotel. Does he have enough time to burn a gigantic peephole in the drapes behind which he is hiding his lascivious, licentious body? Yes, he does. The peephole is so large now that his whole face can be seen through it.

But perhaps the baron wants Greta Garbo to see and admire his face. He is rather handsome and has no reason whatsoever to hide his face behind anything, be it a curtain or a wardrobe door. His body is not ugly either, come to think of it. He is a well-built man in his forties. So he draws the curtains apart, leaves his hiding place and plants himself in the middle of the room. 'She might call the police,' he thinks all of a sudden. Actually he is afraid that, upon seeing a man in the middle of her room, Greta Garbo will rush out at once, giving herself no opportunity to admire the features and the built of this man. 'And she is short-sighted, I'm told,' he remembers, glancing around in search of another hiding place.

He runs towards the bed, kneels down and lowers his head onto the bedside rug. 'Too narrow,' he says to himself, lifting his head and shaking it as despondently as before. A tiny quantity of the cigarette ash drops on the bedside rug. And as the ash lands up on the rug the baron at last remembers his cigarette. (He remembers too many things within a short period of time. These memories paralyse him, depriving his thoughts and actions of the impetus they need to accomplish their task.) 'What am I doing with this cigarette?' he asks himself, staring at the

remnant of the cigarette he lit up a few minutes ago to burn a hole in the curtain. 'No, it's not the same cigarette, is it? You can't burn such a hole with one cigarette,' he meditates, holding the cigarette level with his bloodshot eyes. 'How many cigarettes have I smoked in this room?' he wonders as he deposits the smoking butt on the rug. 'I should try and stop smoking. Many people do. Lung cancer.'

Engrossed in his gloomy, health-oriented reflections and fears (and in the recollection of Greta Garbo's beauty), the baron forgets to extinguish the cigarette butt which consequently sets fire to the rug a few moments later. The baron scrambles to his feet and stamps the fire out. 'What am I doing?' he asks himself. 'She'll smell the fire and call the police. Or has she got a cold? Can she smell anything? Anyway she's sure to detect the smell of the smoke. Does she smoke herself?' The baron is so absorbed by the questions he keeps on asking himself that he pays no attention to the clickety-clack of heels on the wooden floor. Somebody is getting closer and closer to the room where he is supposed to hide himself, but he does not hear the footsteps of the future visitor. Who is it? Just a visitor? Another Peeping Tom? No, it is not a man, judging by the clickety-clack of the heels. Nor is it a chambermaid. Judging by the clickety-clack of the heels. Who is it then? Greta Garbo herself, no doubt.

She opens the door, sees a man planted in the middle of her room and rushes out, shouting, 'Police, police!' And when the police arrive on the scene of the crime, she tells them she found a thief in her room, a hotel thief. 'He's stolen my pearls, he's stolen my pearls!' The baron attempts to flee justice but a few policemen are awaiting him in the lobby of the hotel.

The policemen depart with their prey. A receptionist observes that the baron is not as handsome as he appears on the screen. Sure enough, in film studios a thick layer of make-up covers everybody. Reality and daylight, however, expose the cosmetic fraud. Besides, the baron is running to plumpness so that his numerous female admirers had better not inspect him too closely, if their dreams, films and virtual worlds are to remain intact.

THE FREETHINKER

I went to a museum. The museum was closed. I was disappointed at first. Then I told myself, 'Life itself is a museum.'

Suddenly I saw a door. The door was locked. 'The Life Museum' was written on the door. I turned round and saw another door. It was locked as well. The same inscription ran across it.

I seemed to have been excluded from life. Then I realised I was dead. Then I realised I was not yet born. Then I realised I did not live fully enough to deserve being defined as a living man. What does 'living man' mean? I asked myself. The definition is not easy to pin down. So I did not pin it down, leaving the whole matter to God. 'He fashioned me out of clay or dust. Let Him do the rest! Is there any theoretical reason for His reluctance to label me as living? Anyway I must abide by the will of the Almighty.'

I hoped my thoughts sounded like a prayer. I hoped my prayer would open all the doors. And all the doors opened instantly. There was nothing beyond them. 'Life is empty,' I told myself. 'There's nothing in it except deceptions and illusions. We find ourselves in The Life Museum, but this museum is closed even when it's open. Kafka was wrong. What the Hell is all this fuss about? I hate the robed and bearded mystics who mutter profundities about life and love and laws and the jaws of Satan. There are no laws, no guards, no light beyond the doors. Are the doors locked? Are they before us or behind us? Are we dead or alive? What does it matter! I must be dreaming.'

And I woke up. I laughed upon awakening. I recalled a Russian friend of mine who always spoke about God. During our meetings I tended to counterbalance his hysterical outpourings by speaking at length about art. 'Art is more important than God because God is just a work of art. Not a masterpiece at that!' I told him in our recent conversation.

In my nightmare our themes became interwoven: Hell and Heaven, art and God. I was wide-awake now. I still hated eternal problems and the expression they are given in sermons and so-called metaphysical novels. 'Man is free,' I thought. 'No sword hangs above his head. Just open your door and get out.'

I followed my own advice and found myself in the street. I was free to choose any course of action. I was free to walk. I was free to die. 'And it has nothing to do with so-called free will,' I told myself. 'I'm walking down the street. Why am I walking? I haven't willed myself to walk.'

I'm just walking, that's all there's to it! And don't you ever bring it up again! I'm fed up with your laws and courts and mysteries! It's a stone, nothing more!' I picked up a stone. 'It's not a thing in itself! Just a stone!' The profusion of exclamation marks did not bother me. Not in the slightest! Yet I am a peaceful type. My nature is mild.

'I can turn to the right, I can turn to the left, I can turn my back on the past and on the future, I can forget Time, I can disregard Space, I can stand forever in this corner and regard this corner as the cornerstone of Creation.' As I exposed my views to myself, the corner in which I stood became the cornerstone of Creation.

I turned my back on Creation and continued my walk through the city. 'What's Creation?' I thought. 'It's just what I left behind. Creation is behind me now. Why should I bother about it? Let's create something new.' And I created another Creation. And my Creation was far better than the one I had coped with in the days of my youth. I had struggled for life and power in that Creation over there: I actually saw that Creation at the far end of the street. 'It was such a long time ago,' I thought. 'Europe, the United States. I had covered such a distance in the course of my walk.'

I turned my back on Time. 'Does it still deserve the capital T?' I wondered. The old Creation did not deserve to be capitalised any longer and I wrote on a wall: 'creation' and turned my back on it.

I had My Creation in front of me. And I wrote on My Wall: 'MY CREATION'. And I was pleased with what I had done. And I decided to go on holiday. Suddenly I felt tired: creating worlds is a tiresome process.

'How many worlds have I created?' I asked myself. And I began to count my worlds. It is a creative process as well. You create your worlds as you count them one by one. Kabbalah propounds the same theory.

First I counted all the capital letters that adorned the walls around me, then I counted the walls. Counting walls is a tiresome process.

There were only letters and figures in my worlds. And the walls. 'You're imprisoned within the walls of your own imagination and ambition,' my Russian friend told me. A rather simplistic analysis of the situation. My mother was much nearer to the truth.

‘He has delusions of grandeur,’ she said one afternoon, stroking my hair and slipping a piece of cake into my mouth. I *am* great. And great people create not only prisons but also doors that lead out of those prisons.

I created a number of doors which opened of their own accord: in MY CREATION even the doors had been endowed with free will. Even colons were free: to appear: whenever and: wherever they: wished.

And I was as free as the colons. I appeared here and there. I supervised MY CREATIONS as best I could. I walked along MY ALLEYS and rejoiced at the sight of MY TREES and BUSHES. I loved them dearly. But I was also free to hate them.

COMMISERATION VIRUS

1.

Somebody moved away from our house. Nobody even remembers who it was.

There is nothing wrong with our house. It is rather spacious and clean. Children used to like it. Old people never grumbled about it. There is a lift in it. There are a few trees in the backyard. There are very few cars in the adjacent streets. It is peaceful and healthy around here.

2.

The story began several years ago. Somebody moved away from our house for no reason at all. The female occupants of our house affirm that it was a man and, out of politeness, I share their opinion.

He had not been sent abroad on an important mission. Nor had he found a better flat in a better city, in a better country. He simply moved away.

‘Why?’ asked Elisabeth.

‘Something must be wrong with our house,’ said Emilia.

‘There’s nothing wrong with our house,’ said Emma. And I upheld this view.

‘But he moved away. A handsome man,’ said Elisabeth.

‘It was a woman,’ said her husband.

‘There *was* a reason,’ said Emilia’s husband.

‘Why are there so few cars in the neighbourhood?’ asked Elisabeth. ‘They must be afraid of our house.’

‘Negative aura,’ said Emilia. And she made for the stairs. She was afraid of the lift. Her husband followed in her footsteps. The door of their flat remained wide open.

Shortly afterwards all the doors in our house stood wide open, revealing the disorder of everyday life.

‘Our things are contaminated,’ said Emma and her words reverberated throughout the house.

‘Your words are contaminated too,’ said Elisabeth’s husband.

‘What about *your* words?’ asked Emma.

‘Let’s not speak any more,’ said Elisabeth, chasing her words away with both arms.

And they silently forsook the house, leaving behind their things and words and thoughts and habits.

3.

Why did I write in the third paragraph of my story: ‘The female occupants of our house affirm that it was a man and, out of politeness, I share their opinion’? I ought to have put this sentence in the past tense for the sake of accuracy. They *used* to talk in this house, men and women. I am alone now. But I still hear their voices. And their voices are contagious. All the sounds I hear inside and outside my room are contagious—even the *Kunst der Fuge* by Bach. The voices of those fugues seem to contaminate each other.

I am also ill. Is it a musical disease I have caught? I adore classical music and listen to it four hours a day.

4.

The trees in the backyard have taken on a distant look. They used to be on friendly terms with the house and myself. Now they seem to recoil whenever I salute them from my window. I wonder what their reaction would have been had I touched them, let alone caressed their barks.

I never go outdoors. I will not forsake the house in the hour of distress, even if this hour lasts for many years.

HOMAGE TO MAGRITTE

A fish stood by a window. Nobody was surprised at seeing such a picture because everybody had been told what it was all about. The fish stood on its fan, looking upward. Everybody knew already it was a picture by René Magritte entitled *A la recherche de la vérité*.

‘*In Search of Truth*,’ translated Mr Kreutz who was not sure his guests had understood the title.

‘Did you buy this painting recently?’ asked Mr Wood.

‘I didn’t buy it,’ said Mr Kreutz. ‘A fortnight ago I found it standing by the window.’

‘What is it doing there?’ asked Mr Bloom.

‘It must have found the truth in my apartment.’ And Mr Kreutz stepped back, his head cocked to one side, to admire the picture.

‘Why does it stand by the window then? Does it want to get out?’ asked Mr Plume.

‘Shall we open the window?’ suggested Mrs Plume. ‘Let’s give it a chance!’

‘It’s not a bird,’ said Mr Kreutz, raising his outspread arms.

‘But how did it get in here? It’s not a man either. It can’t walk,’ said Mr Wood.

‘Do you mean to say that only men can walk?’ asked Mrs Kreutz.

‘Women can walk too,’ agreed Mr Wood.

‘Women can fly,’ corrected Mrs Plume.

‘In a figurative sense,’ corrected Mr Wood.

‘It doesn’t make sense to fly in a figurative sense, does it?’ said Mr Bloom jokingly.

‘It does,’ said Mrs Plume defiantly.

‘What’s the difference between figurative sense and figurative art?’ asked Mrs Bloom.

‘Is it a figurative work or a surrealist one?’ asked Mr Wood, pointing to the picture.

‘In my opinion, it’s a realistic painting,’ said Mr Kreutz.

‘Why did you confine it to the living room?’ asked Mrs Wood.

‘I didn’t,’ said Mr Kreutz, pointing to the door.

‘Then open the window at once!’ cried Mrs Plume, pointing to the window.

‘The door is open,’ said Mr Kreutz.

Everybody looked at the door, at the window and at the picture. Nobody and nothing moved.

‘I think we should call the police,’ said Mr Bloom, pointing to the telephone.

‘Let’s call the police,’ agreed Mr Kreutz.

Nobody and nothing moved.

‘Why don’t you call the police?’ asked Mr Wood.

‘I can’t,’ said Mr Kreutz.

‘We’re paralysed,’ guessed Mr Plume.

‘That’s what we’ve been looking for all our lives,’ guessed Mr Bloom, pointing to the picture.

‘The fish searched for truth and found the picture,’ said Mr Kreutz. ‘The picture searched for truth and found this window in my apartment. We looked at the picture and found the truth.’

‘Magritte searched for truth and painted the picture,’ said Mrs Bloom.

‘Truth is subjectivity,’ said Mr Wood, quoting Kierkegaard.

‘Truth is a fish,’ said Mr Bloom.

‘Truth is a window,’ said Mr Kreutz. ‘In my apartment,’ he added.

‘Truth is the vision of an artist,’ said Mrs Bloom.

‘The door is still open,’ said Mrs Plume. ‘Do shut it at once!’

Nobody and nothing moved.

‘I think we should call the police,’ repeated Mr Bloom.

KNOW THYSELF!

I know myself pretty well, I suppose. I know that I cannot endure three strangers for more than one and a half hours. So I count the strangers I am introduced to and then surreptitiously look at my watch.

Of course I can endure three strangers for two or even five hours, if need be. But I become unbearable whenever my patience is tried to the limit—especially in public. And I am perfectly aware of this. Were I a stranger to myself, I would hardly endure my own behaviour in those moments of fatigue and irritation. So I take French leave and go home.

Yet I cannot stay at home for more than three hours without saying a word to someone—an acquaintance of mine or an utter stranger. And I am fully aware of this abnormality. I keep calm for two hours and then become fidgety. I pace up and down my room. I dial a few telephone numbers. If nobody is at home, I go out and talk to strangers in the streets—for half an hour.

This intimate knowledge of my own ways spares me a lot of unpleasant moments. I have no wish to make a nuisance of myself. Nor am I fond of nervous breakdowns.

I know however that I cannot endure a long period of quiet—'eventlessness', I call it. From time to time I simply *have* to make a nuisance of myself, exposing my equanimity to insults and reproaches. So I go out and do it. I mean, I make a nuisance of myself. I know that my resistance to the 'nuisance impulse', as I call it, might result in a catastrophe—murder or self-murder or worse. So I prefer to make a nuisance of myself—the most harmless outlet for my pent-up emotions.

On the other hand, I know for sure that I need a nervous breakdown once a year, preferably in summertime. Otherwise I am liable to kill two strangers or even a dear friend of mine—Nicholas, for instance. So I consult my calendar, choose a date and write underneath it: 'The outbreak of a nervous breakdown.'

How to have a nervous breakdown without cause—at the wrong moment, so to speak?

I proceed as follows:

I invent a valuable reason—my being mortal or something along these lines—and concentrate upon it to the best of my abilities. I sit sullen and silent for hours on end without saying a word to anyone. And then I dial the number of my psychoanalyst who is supposed to define my mental state.

If he says I am not gloomy enough, I seize hold of my subconscious, shake it thoroughly and tilt it up. I shake it again and all my fears tumble out, scattering about my conscious. After a while my subconscious gets the upper hand in the struggle with my conscious and I succumb to a nervous breakdown.

I am also aware of the fact that I need to murder someone every two years. So I go out and murder someone—a stranger or a relative of mine. I must choose between killing others or doing away with myself. And I invariably choose the former.

I know that my choice is incorrect and inhuman, but there is nothing I can do about it.

CLOCK OF YOUTH

A fourteen-year-old girl disappeared some weeks ago. She was neither raped nor kidnapped: according to her mother, she would not have allowed a stranger to touch her body.

‘We were on good terms,’ said her mother, dismissing a third hypothesis. ‘She couldn’t have run away.’

‘People don’t disappear,’ said a police officer indulgently. ‘They appear sometimes,’ he added, pointing at a corpse. ‘We found it in a copse,’ he said.

‘There was a picnic in Australia,’ said the mother. ‘It happened at Hanging Rock. Three girls disappeared forever. They’re still missing.’

‘They must be hiding somewhere,’ said the police officer. ‘Girls adore playing hide-and-seek.’

‘It happened in 1900,’ said the mother indignantly.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the officer. ‘Do you see that girl over there?’ And he pointed at a distant corner of the room. ‘She’s been hiding from her parents and others for sixty-five years. We see her of course, but we don’t say anything. Children should be spared negative emotions.’

‘How old is she?’ asked the mother.

‘Fifteen,’ said the officer. ‘She doesn’t grow old. Human beings are the bearers of Time. If it weren’t for them, Time wouldn’t have sprung into existence. So she hides from Time, as a matter of fact.’

The mother listened to the officer but did not understand a blind thing. She thought he was making fun of her grief and immediately threw a tantrum. ‘You’re pulling my leg!’ she cried and complained to his superiors. The officer was dismissed from the force and became a recluse in his own house.

The mother continued to search for her lost child in the woods and in the streets, in cellars and attics. ‘Why is she hiding from me?’ she wondered. ‘She should have hidden herself in the living room.’

Once she saw her daughter standing in a corner of the living room. ‘I’ve found you!’ she shouted. Her daughter did not turn a hair.

Presently other girls appeared in the room. They ran around or stood in the corners. They wore white dresses and looked like old photographs.

‘How old are you?’ asked the mother. ‘Are you all my daughters? May I join you?’

She also became a recluse in her own house.

The house was located on the outskirts of a large city perched on the top of Hanging Rock in Australia. There was a fierce wind blowing. The city swung with great regularity—like a pendulum.

GOING WITH THE TIDE

1.

All of a sudden he lost all his desires.

He was walking down the street. He had no wish to walk. He had no wish to stop. So he slackened his pace, but he did not stop. He was walking sideways.

The air carried him along. He was lying on the air. He dozed off as he floated down the street: he wished neither to fall asleep nor to stay awake.

His watch slowed down to keep up with the times. There was nothing to look forward to. The horizon was everywhere. The centre of the circle and its circumference coincided at last.

He would let a number of thoughts agglomerate in his mind. He gave preference to none of them. And he would let these thoughts fade out of his mind.

2.

What can one write about such a man?

sense...about...was...exhilaration...of...being...beach...there...alone...the...on...a...

He *was* alone on the beach, quite alone. But he did not feel exhilarated. The air had carried him as far as the ocean and deposited him on the shingle like a parcel.

He was wrapped up in his clothes like a parcel. The air and a number of people carried his body from one place to another without unwrapping it. They had no desire to see what was inside.

They put him in coffins and buried him in distant cemeteries. There was a shortage of the dead in the universe. And he was prepared to die at very short notice.

After a while they dug him out to corroborate some scientific or religious theory.

And again he would find himself on the beach.

about...alone...the...was...on...sense...beach...of... exhilaration...there...being...a...

The tide was on the turn.

a...being...there...

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

I read somewhere that stoics used to say in classrooms: If you delete the sentence in which you speak about your wounds, you will be cured on the spot.

I hope I understand the meaning of this sentence that I have read in some book or other. I might have heard it on television, for all I know. I don't remember when and where I heard or read it. Never mind. It is the meaning of the sentence that counts, I suppose.

And even if I cross this sentence out, I'll still understand it, I imagine.

I will not cross it out. I will not.

I will cross out the sentence in which my wounds are enumerated. And I will also delete the sentence in which my future sufferings are adumbrated.

But I should write these sentences first. But I don't know how to set about it. There are two 'buts' in this paragraph, but I will not delete them. You should not delete too many things, otherwise you might delete something important. And this important thing will thus disappear forever.

So I'll enumerate my wounds.

The first wound: my grandfather gave me a spank when I was five years old.

The second wound: my grandmother gave me a spank when I was seven years old.

The third wound: my mother said, 'Like father like son,' when I was thirteen years old.

The fourth wound: my mother said, 'like father like son,' when I was fifteen years old.

The fifth wound: I became like my father at the age of twenty-six. Was it my fault or that of my mother? I don't know whose fault it was, but I know it was a wound. It still is. I still look and behave like my father.

And my son takes after me.

The sixth wound: I am old. My father was old too. I *feel* old.

The seventh wound: my wife doesn't understand me. And I don't understand my wife. And we don't understand each other. How many wounds are there in this paragraph?

The eighth wound: we still live together. My father didn't divorce my mother.

The ninth wound: my wife slapped my face two years ago.

The tenth wound: my wife psychologically wounded me three months ago.

The eleventh wound: my wife told my son, 'Like father like son.' When? I don't really know. It is something she says almost every week.

The twelfth wound: I do nothing about it.

The thirteenth wound: nothing doing.

The fourteenth wound: all the other wounds, their continuous presence.

I have crossed them out. And I have thrown the paper out of the window. Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!

I can see the sheet of paper lying on the curb. Why haven't I torn it to pieces? It is a windless day.

Can I tear this day to pieces? Today, this windless day? How to create a windy tomorrow? By tearing today to pieces?

Is my life a house of cards?

Should I snatch one day from it?

Should I cross this day out? Where?

The sheet of paper is still lying under my window. My fifteenth wound, no doubt. I don't feel it. I feel no pain.

How many painless wounds are there in my soul? Are they worse than the ones I can feel? Are they more dangerous? I have no idea where to look for them.

How many wives do I have? How many fathers? Do I look like all of them?

How many times do I have to write down: 'Nothing doing'?

How many daughters do I have?

PREVENTION

They made a point of not doing anything that might be construed as a hostile act. They never lifted their arms. They never picked stones.

They never looked at anybody. (The human glance is measureless. An innocent stare gives rise to ethical problems. You can read a threat into any human glance.)

They renounced the use of pens and pencils. (Whatever you write is subject to an infinite number of interpretations and misinterpretations. Words perforate Time. Words get bored to death by their own meanings. But words do not die. Words feel fidgety. With the passing of the years words turn into their antonyms. Besides, pens are often used for writing anonymous missives.)

They never bought plane tickets for fear of being denounced as terrorists. (Nobody flies nowadays except those who wish to hijack planes and extort money from the authorities. Flying has become so dangerous that ordinary people do not so much as approach airports. Those seen in the vicinity of an airport are either ground staff or terrorists.)

They never put their hands in their pockets.

They never smiled. (There are such things as malicious smiles.)

They never sliced anything. In the following sentence ‘They sliced the air with their knives’ they might delete the words ‘sliced’, ‘knives’ and sometimes ‘they’ for fear of being confused with ‘them’. In the following sentence ‘The shark’s fin sliced through the water’ they might delete the word ‘shark’. They were afraid of the word ‘shark’ being accidentally found on their shelves, in their writing desks and chests of drawers.

They never shed tears. (Human tears are a powerful weapon.)

They never switched their lights off.

They never walked in deserted streets.

They never knocked at doors.

They never switched their radios on, lest their neighbours might hear the following weather forecast: ‘Heavy rainstorms will surely create treacherous driving conditions and cause dozens of accidents.’

They never switched their televisions on, lest some pedestrians might see the news.

They never pointed at mushrooms.

They never sang the *Internationale*.

They never spoke to anyone. (Words have been created to threaten those who understand them. Whenever an individual opens his mouth to say something, another individual either runs away or snatches at his gun.)

They never played music. (There is such a thing as hostile harmony.)

They never lifted their feet.

UNISORM, UNIVERSE

School uniform encourages children to think in unison. The first lesson at every school is usually devoted to the comparison between the words ‘unison’ and ‘uniform’. A teacher writes these words side by side on the blackboard and shows them to his pupils. He then pronounces these words, bringing out their similarity.

‘They sound alike, don’t they?’ says he.

The pupils are ordered to repeat the words and then to sing them. Their mouths open and close in unison. It looks as if all the children in the classroom have one mouth only. It sounds as if this mouth is identical to the teacher’s.

And the pointer soars and plummets as the teacher conducts the choir and strikes those singing slowly or faintly or out of tune. And the pupils collapse and rise and are struck once again. Some of them die. Others go on with their song.

And the pupils are taken to the cinema. A word looms out of the screen: ‘UNISORM’. The pupils recognise it and shout for joy. They refuse to see the movie. They gaze at the word and shout. They repeat and sing the word.

And the pupils get hungry and thirsty. They are taken to a fast food restaurant and eat UNISORM. And they drink UNISORM. ‘Eat all the letters! Drink all the letters!’ shouts the teacher. In the meantime he has shrunk, becoming a teenager. ‘Teacher, teenager,’ he sings. ‘Don’t these words sound alike?’

‘Grown-ups, teenagers,’ sing the pupils. They leave the fast food restaurant and go up the street, striking grown-ups with metal rods. ‘We’re beating you into shape,’ they sing. And the grown-ups shrink, becoming teenagers.

And the teenagers go to bookshops and re-write all the books. *UNISORM* they write on the covers. Chapter one: U. Chapter two: N. Chapter three: R. They might change the order but not the letters.

And the teenagers build houses in the shape of the letters M, O, R, S. 'We're building you into shape,' they sing. Some of the houses collapse, others remain.

And the teenagers buy and sell 'unisorm' all over the universe.

ALONE. ALONE

I'd hate to play gooseberry to you and your boyfriend. So I'll leave you alone. I don't want to leave you alone, to tell the truth. I'd rather stay and talk to you forever. Alone, alone. I'm in love with you. I've been in love with you for many years. Ever since I saw you at that country station in the middle of nowhere. Do you remember our first meeting? The sudden chill raised gooseflesh on your arms. It's chilly, you said. I agreed. I knew your heart was cold.

Interior monologues are superfluous. Nobody hears them except the 'speaker'. And the 'speaker' knows what he speaks about. The information he imparts to himself is superfluous, for he supplies his mind with the information that issues from his mind—not from an outside source. Whom does he ask the question: 'Do you remember our first meeting?' It looks as if he is talking to himself. It sounds this way and there is nothing he can do about it. And the sudden chill raises gooseflesh on his arms.

'It's chilly,' he says in a subdued voice.

'It's rather hot this afternoon. What are you doing here anyway? Why don't you leave us alone? Don't you see I'm in love with him?'

How can she speak to me like that? Why is she so cruel? What have I done to her? Why is she in love with this nonentity that comes from a family of nonentities? Do you remember our first meeting? Do you remember the flowers I gave you five years ago?

'Beat it, buddy, or I'll knock your block off!'

'I'd hate to play gooseberry to you and your boyfriend,' he mumbles. 'So I'll leave you alone.'

I don't want to leave you alone, to tell the truth. I'd rather stay and talk to you forever. Alone, alone. I'm in love with you.

THE FUNERAL CEREMONIES OCCUPIED A WEEK

‘The right may now have overplayed its hand, because the President has made a sudden lurch towards the left,’ wrote a newspaper.

When the President learnt what had been written about him, he resolved to make a sudden lurch towards the right: he was keen to strike a balance in his policies. And he immediately carried his plan out.

A TV newscaster announced solemnly: ‘The President seated himself in his Louis XV armchair and folded his arms.’

The President decided it was time to keep quiet. He seated himself in his Louis XV armchair and folded his arms.

Two weeks later, an important magazine declared in the political column: ‘The left may now have overplayed its hand, because the President has made a sudden lurch towards the right.’

The President paid no attention to this piece of news.

Two days later he heard on the radio: ‘The right may now have overplayed its hand, because the President has made a sudden lurch towards the centre and the extreme right.’

He switched off the radio.

‘After lurching away from Socialism in 1986, the President now seems to be lurching back.’

The President did not budge.

‘With a tremendous lurch the President fell over the Vice-President.’

The President did not budge.

‘Last night the wife of the President was looking luscious in faded overalls and a flannel shirt.’

The President cast a look at his wife and shook his head. The night before they had been playing Scrabble.

‘The President still wears baggy checked trousers.’

‘The President has himself described our country as “small, overpopulated and on the list of the world’s poorest countries”.’

‘The President’s proposals sound like a last ditch attempt to secure peace.’

‘The President’s overtaxed brain rebelled and everything went blank.’

‘Mr Twister says policing is too important a matter to be left in incompetent hands.’

‘The President has made a sudden lurch towards the right.’

‘The President found himself outflanked over income policies.’

‘It is a crime for the President to obstruct justice.’

‘The President is suffering from a bowel obstruction.’

‘I have noticed the President’s inconsistency on abortion and marijuana.’

‘The President’s arm will remain in plaster for at least two months.’

‘The President is expected to be in hospital for at least three weeks and will be immobilised in a plaster cast.’

The President was smoking a cigar in his Louis XV armchair.

‘Have they already killed you?’ asked his wife.

‘I don’t think so,’ he answered, switching on the radio.

AN AMATEUR PSYCHOANALYST

There is a nervous look in his eyes and this look seems rather suggestive. What does it suggest? Does he want me to do something for him, something he can't do himself? What can't he do? He wouldn't stick at murder, judging from his looks and manners. Perhaps he can't kill *anybody*. Just foreigners or strangers. Or relatives, some distant relatives. But not his next-of-kin, not his father. Does he want to kill his father? If I asked him this question, he would say 'No', I suppose. You don't acknowledge this kind of homicidal impulse, do you? Does he want *me* to kill his father? The only way to find out is to kill his father.

So I killed his father. I returned to the room where he was sitting on a bed and broke the news to him. The look in his eyes didn't alter. He seemed unsatisfied. 'Isn't that enough?' I asked him. He gave no answer to my question. 'I was right,' I thought.

So I killed his mother. 'Is *that* enough?' I asked him. His eyes didn't change colour. So I killed his wife.

Now he answers my questions and his eyes are different. Their colour is different. He talks about his childhood. He talks about his hatred. 'I hated my father because he shared this room with my mother. I hated my mother because she shared this room with my father. I hated my wife because she shared this room with me. I've always dreamt of having this room to myself. The view is wonderful, isn't it? I don't want to share this view. And I will not allow anybody to sleep in my bed!'

He lies in his bed now. He is asleep. I have pacified his psyche. I have purified his unconscious. Isn't one happy man enough to redeem the suffering of humanity?

THE FAIRY TALE

I am not sure I have anything to say about life and its reflections, resonances, its representations in the heads of those who often have no heads at all – just a sort of tumour. You have a tumour and you think rather sincerely that it is your brain you consider with respect and awe. You even lavish a lot of compliments on it, saying, ‘You’re my brain and you’re very clever, you know. Of course you know you’re clever. How stupid of me to touch upon your cleverness in this way!’ Fortunately I have a lot of texts on my writing desk and even elsewhere, although I am not always aware of the whereabouts of this elsewhere, of these elsewheres: I am at a loss as to their structures and features. I am at a loss anyway, and my losses grow every minute as I turn around and access the database, as they say nowadays. I have no idea what they mean, but I do know you cannot access the database without a valid password. And what is my password, I wonder? It is probably my name, although you are not safe if you use your name as your password. Of course you can pass and you do pass, but then you hear a lot of footsteps behind you, all around you, and you realise you are about to be captured and tortured; in spite of Stalin’s death. Anyway, it is better to stay somewhere else, but you do not always know where this somewhere is situated, given that you are everywhere; otherwise you are nowhere. You have to take into consideration every inch of the planet you inhabit because every inch of this planet – and of other planets as well – threatens you all the time; every inch of time, as they say sometimes. Well, you have no alternative but to hide under the surface of the Earth, and that is what happens every time you feel threatened by evil empires or individuals – in the course of your wonderful life. First you hide under your blanket; then you hide under the crust of the Earth or any other planet or asteroid. You hide under them and listen to whatever goes on above your head, thoughts, intentions and fears. You say to yourself, ‘This is a pedestrian who doesn’t carry a gun – for once,’ you add. ‘And this is a tank, unmistakably,’ and you recall your friend who was killed when his tank ran over a mine. And then you hear a gun that fires a shell capable of piercing the armour of an enemy tank. You have no idea whether the tank you hear belongs to your friends or enemies. And what about the shells you hear and almost feel all over your body?

Once upon a time, some writer wrote a story, a fairy tale. Whatever happens to us is linked to fairies without whom we would not be able to cook anything, let alone fold our clothes.

Nothing is feasible without these creatures, and their invisibility ensures their efficacy, odd as it may appear. Whenever we see a human being, we wonder if this being is professional or not. We wonder if we can entrust this creature with an arduous task upon which our life often depends. Every gesture we spot arouses our suspicions and we begin to fear for our life well before the job is accomplished or rather unaccomplished. We put a bunch of dollars (or flowers) on a nearby table and say, 'Thank you very much, but I think I can manage without your skill, without your work's undeniable perfection.' Then we watch the creature's departure and heave a sigh of relief. Then we go to the front door and open it to make sure that no vestiges of this phenomenon can be seen in the neighbourhood and even beyond it. We shout, 'Please, come back! I'll give you another 1,000 dollars!' And if no one comes – this happens very seldom – we heave another sigh of relief and double-lock the door. Sure enough, this kind of thing happens very seldom: someone is *bound* to come and you see one hand, two hands. They almost touch your belly as if your sense of touch were far more developed and sophisticated than your sight; and you reluctantly put five dollars into this hand. And then you hear a series of screams which all amount to the same question, 'What? What? What? What does this mean? Why are you so mean?'

You explain painstakingly that the amount of money you hand out has nothing to do with greediness or pettiness. 'I'm rather short of money on account of Covid. Recently I lost a fortune and, contrary to my expectations, my grandmother didn't bequeath me her paintings and sculptures. I don't even know what museum she bequeathed them to. She might have sent them to a lunatic asylum, for all I know – throughout her life she pitied lunatics, their sorry plight, their incapacity to understand the world.' Of course you are asked immediately if you yourself understand the world and its intricacies. You answer sincerely, 'Not *all* the intricacies, I'm afraid. But I understand *some* of them which enables me to cope with the problems we all encounter in everyday life.' Of course you are always asked the following question, 'Can you cope with the unpredictability of our existence? Can you predict anything at all? Can you predict the nightly appearance or birth of the moon?' And you answer frankly, 'I can, to some extent I can. And please don't inquire about the size of this extent. But even if the moon appears neither in the sky nor anywhere else, I won't feel wretched. I won't become a quivering wreck.' You know for sure that the next question is likely to sound thus, 'Aren't you a quivering wreck right now, at this particular moment?' And you prepare your answer – just in case. But the case does not see the light of day and you say bye-bye to your visitor, dismissing his hands and ingratiating smiles.

And if this visitor of yours continues to touch your belly, you flick his fingers off and shut the door – once and for all, as you say to yourself.

Here is the fairy tale I am talking about:

GOD IS IN THE MAKING

Apparently the man, who had been hiding in the oubliettes of a Renaissance castle for three years, spoke last month before a small audience composed mostly of children and old women. What did he speak about? Nobody knows. But everybody knows that the man in hiding spoke last month and not the month before. Actually he had emitted no sound for two years. He had neither sighed nor sobbed, let alone spoken a human language. He must have taken the vow of silence a long time ago. Why then did he speak last month?

Why does nobody know what he said in the course of his speech? Did he speak a foreign language? He did not. Moreover, his articulation was perfect. What did he say then? ‘Nothing,’ reply the children. ‘Nothing,’ reply the old women. ‘A hotchpotch of ideas,’ say all of them in unison. What ideas? ‘We don’t know.’

‘You’re not intelligent enough to understand his meaning,’ say the middle-aged and old men. ‘Next time we shall go and hear what he is willing to impart to us.’

They descended into the oubliettes and listened to silence. Time was passing by them, brushing against their shoulders. They felt Time physically as if it were an animal—a prehistoric animal one does not see nowadays on the surface of the Earth. They felt and heard Time, nothing but Time. They did not hear the man who had aroused their curiosity to the point of making them crouch in the subterranean labyrinth and wait for hours and hours.

One of the listeners, angered and terrified by the silence, began to speak himself, gesticulating energetically and chaotically. His voice resounded so mightily in the tunnels of the underworld that those who had not been allowed to join the expedition heard almost every word he uttered. Some of them squatted down and applied their ears to the Earth and floorboards. These heard too much: they heard what had never been uttered or even conceived.

The news was dutifully brought to the nearby villages and towns. ‘The man has spoken. He is angry. He is angry with us. He’ll punish us. He can’t be a man. His voice doesn’t resound like human voices. He says what no human mind can ever conceive. He must be God. In disguise. He

speaks seldom, but whenever he speaks the Earth quakes and the volcanoes belch forth fire and stones.'

Their voices resounded so mightily under the vault of heaven that the inhabitants of the capital city heard every other word the villagers uttered. The city scribes compiled a huge book which was handed down to posterity.

Actually this is only the first part of the story, and leaving it unfinished may signify my attachment to what is called an 'open work' or an 'open opus'. Loose ends are the main characteristic of this genre or tendency: after reading the last sentence you wonder whether you have to go right or left, whether the hero is about to be murdered for the sake of the freedom and happiness of some people. As often happens in fairy tales – at least in Russian fairy tales – you see a boulder on which someone engraved the following words, 'If you go left you will marry a multimillionaire. If you go right you will become a king. If you go straight ahead you will be murdered in no time at all.' Defiant and fearless, you go straight ahead, all the while consulting your watch. Time goes on; so do you. Nothing happens and you realise that predictions and forebodings are always wrong, even when they come from Nostradamus. That is what they call an 'open work': you open it and find yourself in a boundless no-man's land: no horizons, no stars. You wish to reach the sun situated at the end of Paradise, but no sun greets you at that particular instant of your journey. That might mean you are in Hell.

And what about so-called 'closed works'? You make a few steps (or read a few pages) and bang your head against a wall. Astounded, you begin to knock on the wall: apparently no one heard the sound produced by your head. Of course your head is more efficient (in this domain) than your fists, but you care about your head, about the treasure hidden inside it. All right – you relinquish the idea of writing a commentary on a work of art, be it open, closed or half-open, half-closed. You peep through a peephole and then withdraw into your den, saying to yourself, 'It's highly indecent to look through peepholes because they're just holes and there are no peeps in their neighbourhood.' Nietzsche said something on the subject, on the object called 'interpretation' or 'peephole', for any interpretation is a sort of peephole, whether you like it or not. Of course Duchamp's last masterpiece is commonly regarded as an exception to this rule: you have to look through a hole, otherwise you are not likely to catch a glimpse of it. *Étant donné*s it is called. It is not the first time I touch upon it; ever so slightly. But even this touch

assumes massive proportions if you repeat the gesture every two hours or even far more frequently. You touch the keyhole in question and your touch seems to answer every question related to the picture I am talking about. There is a lady you see through the peephole and in the long run your touch blows the entire picture out of proportion so that you end up making love to this lady and even to the landscape you see in the background. Well, that is what Nietzsche meant when writing about comments, interpretations and works of art you are confronted with from time to time; perhaps on a daily basis. You should not interpret them, not in the least; you just should *make love* to them. And while you are at it, you also make love to life.

Étant donnés is Beckett's *Comment c'est* or *How It Is*. You're not supposed to harass this woman because the gods do not favour such a move. That's how it is and you should bow to the inevitable. This is inevitable and even if you go so far as to break down the door and enter the room, you won't be able to touch this woman. *Comment c'est? C'est comme ça. How It Is? It is How.'*