from Smyrna. About Hegel, about Ideas, about criminality, about death, and about murder as such. One thing is certain—that my belief in him dates from that night in Salonika. And a person who believes in him, they say, is a Satanist.

Translated by Stanley Frye

The Cricket Beneath the Waterfall

Of late I've been living with the dead, holding long conversations with them, sometimes throughout the night. And I'll let you in on my secret: my conversations with the deceased are infinitely more alive than all the contacts and exchange of words with those around me who are allegedly alive. The doctor who treats me and who, in practicing his profession, takes care of my nerves, stolidly maintains that this is the result of "deterioration." He assures me there is nothing more to it than that. Just a kind of physical exhaustion that will "eventually disappear."

Actually, I don't eat properly nor am I able to sleep; I am irritatable and feel physically exhausted. It is quite obvious to me, even without any professional opinion, that my case is truly a case of "deteriorating nerves." But what I cannot understand is how in the world this exhaustion is going to "eventually disappear." On the contrary, it seems to be growing every day—my

insomnia and headaches are only getting worse. Everything appears to me more dismal than ever, with no end in sight.

I practically live in doctors' waiting rooms. In these dark, uninviting, unventilated cubbyholes I scan various advertising brochures from travel agencies or sometimes leaf through the dated, tattered magazines that never seem to contain anything of real interest. All you find there are some tedious, uninspired poems or literary quibbles debating whether "literature is supposed to be politically committed or not." As far as I am concerned (dressed in rags with torn pockets I've been wearing lately; helpless in my destitute state, since I squander all I have on treatment), what do these literary debates have to do with me? Why in the world should I care whether "there is such a thing as literature without political commitment"? The travel agencies, on the other hand, with their colorful brochures, are addressing themselves to me, inviting me most hospitably to spend Easter in Florence or Christmas in Egypt. Here, however, in this stuffy waiting room, where one can hear from behind the wall a broken water tank of an adjoining toilet, like some distant waterfall, here there is nothing but the stench of wet rubbers and melted snow. The magazines that write about commitment in artistic creations are piled up on the table together with medical magazines. In them are more than twenty thousand ads, each product highly recommended to bring sufferers good health and total recovery. To spend Christmas in Aswan does not seem so bad, nor would Easter in Florence be something to despise, especially if it doesn't rain. And the twenty thousand drugs, wrapped in their silvery foil and cellophane, as tempting as the most expensive candies, the Egyptian moonlights, Florence Easter bells, cruise ships, women, halcyon skies, holy wafers, pills—they all prefigure a relief from insomnia, from bad digestion, headaches, and depression. In a word, they all imply well-being and recovery. A recovery, supernaturally miraculous for us miserable creatures who are now listening to the noise of a broken toilet from afar, crumpled up, gray, exhausted,

sitting in the ashy light of a waiting room resembling hell itself. The waiting room is reeking of moldy, disintegrating bits of newspaper and wet umbrellas. An old woman is groaning as she massages her lips with the index finger and thumb of her left hand from one corner of her mouth to the other, pinching her mucous membranes as if squeezing an old prune, until the puffed-up skin of her lips between her bony fingers comes to resemble a hole of raw flesh, gaping like an open dark wound.

The mysterious padded door leading into the doctor's office opens, and in the doorframe appears a nearsighted man in a white coat. He is the magical performer in this enchanted theater, illuminated by a glaringly white shaft of light. With a cold, slightly moist touch of his palm on my cheek, he seems to carry me into a distant realm, across to the other shore somewhere behind those padded doors. He transports me, together with all my nervous entanglements, with all my aching teeth and intestines, with my muddled pre-existence, with all the diseased chaos within me (which all add up to simple diagnostic details, as far as he is concerned). He seems to have simply floated across, with me in tow, from the waiting room to his office. And without really knowing how I got up, how we shook hands, I find myself sitting here facing him again. All I remember is that I suddenly floated weightlessly, finding myself in front of him, a body, an object of diagnosis, a thing held in some alien hands.

"Well, my friend, did anything new happen since our last session?"

"Nothing new has happened, doctor, but my dead people are still talking to me. And they are doing it just as clearly and intensively as ever. I spoke with one of them last night. The summer moonlight was magnificent and he was eating cherries, speaking all the while about the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Virgin. This religious mystery was clear to him to the end, and he never, for a single moment, had any doubts about it. I can't quote you his every word, but some details are still clear in my mind. His left front incisor was gray, as if made

of lead. Besides that gray tooth, I remember that his hands were coated with cold sweat; the cherries he ate were wrapped in a bit of newspaper still damp from the dew of the June night. These are just the bare essentials that got stuck in my mind. I think I also recall the timbre of his voice. It was just a bit consumptive, a gnawed sound, impure and worn out. His lips were slightly discolored by the big black cherries. He spoke about the Blessed Virgin, whose devoted bridegroom he had been since childhood. Even in those years long ago, when we used to fish together in the muddy waters and play games underneath the old walnut tree, he wore a bright-blue congregational bow around his neck as a sign of this devotion."

"Did you, by any chance, steal anything from this dead childhood companion? No matter what! Some worthless trifle, perhaps? An eraser, a pen?"

"Me, steal from him? No, doctor. As far as I remember, I never stole anything from him. Just the opposite. He stole one of my water colors. It was a picture of the rising moon: an orange, deep-yellow disc of the moon rises out of the grayish, ashen mists above the plowed fields; in the left foreground I sketched in a tree, a somber, dark-green, almost black, solemn fir. And he stole that water color from me. He took it home and nailed it on the wall next to his schedule of classes, just as if it were 'his own work.' At least that's how he boasted about 'his' water color to his father. And I never exposed him. You are the first one to whom I am divulging this secret.

"His father was a shoemaker; he wore a bright-green cobbler's apron and had a thick, silky mustache. I still recall how the shiny cutting edge in his hands used to slide silently, with an uncanny sharpness, over the odorous and smooth kidskin. As a shoemaker, he specialized in orthopedic shoes. The window of his shop used to show several plaster casts of feet. They were deformed, crippled, painted bright-pink, and covered all over with bloody abscesses and wounds. And now these sore, disfigured, crippled orthopedic plaster models of feet, the silent movements

of the fatherly hand with the keen edge over the surface of the kidskin, the moonlight and the consumptive voice, are about all that remain of him. And this too is gradually getting dimmer, and soon everything will recede into total grayness. Yes, total grayness will envelop everything, even the laughter of my friend in the moonlight, his eating of the cherries, and the huge archway you had to go through to reach their place. Over it were two plaster angels. Between them they held the oval surface of a blind gypsum mirror; and this mirror was decorated with pears, grapes, melons, and all the other usual symbols of fruitfulness and abundance spilling over it. The driveway continuously resounded with the hollow thumping of horses' hoofs, since in the courtyard of the same house lived a cabdriver with his horse carriage.

"You see, doctor, that's the way it is with me today. My whole life appears to me like a view into a room the doors of which are slowly and silently closing. One can see less and less, and the voices are heard more and more faintly. And there was so much laughter, so much commotion and sound behind those doors. And now they are inexorably closing. In the resulting semidarkness I am eating myself up with restlessness, trying to hear the voices of those who have departed still believing in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin and are no longer with us. Yet I still hear them because their voices continue to echo within me, and this is precisely what I cannot understand. Please explain it to me, doctor! What am I to do with this countless accumulation of dead people inside me? Many of them have died in the insane asylum, and almost all of them wrote poetry and got drunk in wine pubs. Unwashed, they walked around like scarecrows in their crumpled suits, worn-down heels, and greasy hatbands. Some freethinkers among them, though, did confess before their deaths and even took the last sacraments.

"I remember one who had a forehead hardly two inches wide, with thick hair, hard and bristly, that curled like the hair

of a faun. When you talked to him, you half expected to see two horns protruding from that dark, impenetrable, wiry mane—that was the impression his head gave. And yet he was a weakling, a jellyfish. He tried to convince me that life was dirty, dirty in its very existential essence, and that all of life's phenomena should be handled exclusively with gloves. Aristocratically! He was a gray, starved-out bum, with torn shoes and a foul-smelling shirt, soiled like the shirt collars of travelers who spend a sleepless night on a train. This hatless fantast, this famished hobo, wore gray cloth gloves, and on his left hand, over the glove, a silver bracelet decorated with a scarab of hollow tin. The hollow tin bug, with its puffed-up belly perched on top of his bracelet, shimmered green, like a frog with bulging goggle eyes. During the burial, the sky darkened with heavy rain clouds and the frogs actually croaked in the young juicy grass. I was sure it was the little frog on the top of his glove that was croaking. Someone spoke a few words at the freshly dug grave, or rather read off a funeral speech, but everything somehow seemed so stupid—as is usually the case in such ceremonies. The funeral speaker wore a black top hat, had good digestion, and a good prospect for comfortable retirement. He didn't seem to be especially intelligent; otherwise how could he have spoken before an open grave? And then there was the one who played the flute. . . ."

"Please, excuse my interruption, but I don't understand what you mean by the 'one who played the flute.' "

"Oh, yes, of course, he was another one of my dead people, doctor, one of the departed we've been speaking about all this time. He played the flute, but he had a rather limited I.Q. I recall that the cookies baked in his house always tasted of pork lard, which has an unpleasant smell of animal urine. In his home even the raspberry juice had an insipid taste. And there, stuck in various vases, were peacock feathers that emitted some kind of foreboding of things to come. In fact, the flutist was later found shot in a cornfield. The man who found him covered

with blood told me how it all happened. It was a sunny, quiet afternoon of a warm Indian-summer day. The air was perfectly still. Suddenly there was a single shot. The blast resounded across the wooded glens. It hovered for a long, long time, echoing over the entire landscape. Then it slowly floated down to the ground as if equipped with a small parachute."

"You mean to say he was shot in the war?"

"I mean that he was shot. In what way, and where, is absolutely unimportant to me."

"I see. For you the peacock feathers are more important than this death?"

"No, doctor. It's just the reverse. His death is far more important to me than all the peacock feathers. I'll try to explain. This particular dead person, this flute player who was shot, was married to a certain Zosia D, a woman with extraordinary blond hair. She had the complexion of an anemic new-born babe; and, incidentally, she is as dead today as the husband who was shot in a cornfield like a wild rabbit. She is dead now, Zosia D.

"She had herself photographed in her wedding gown with her husband on the steps of the church. He was pale, and the knees of his black parade pants—part of a reserve officer's uniform he had ordered especially for the occasion—showed two gray circles formed when he had knelt before the altar. While we stood in the church with our heads bowed, we were overcome by a distinct premonition that this war marriage couldn't be a happy one. For it had been arranged in haste, in a single night, like some improvised maneuver. And yet, in spite of our dark forebodings, the marriage was happy. It didn't last long, of course, because they shot him. Something quite natural, you see, if you just think a little, since those engaged in war business don't pay special attention to newlyweds.

"I was sitting in a restaurant with Zosia D and the flute player on the eve of their honeymoon trip into death. I didn't know any Polish and Zosia D didn't know any other language. I was there as a sort of best man. I was confused, absent-minded,

deeply convinced that we were playing an extremely dangerous, deadly game. The deceased man, too, hardly knew a word of Zosia's mother tongue, but they were, nevertheless, happy with their stammering and their attempts to communicate by means of fingers and gestures, happy in their deaf-mute melancholy. I sat with them in the same restaurant in which I had been sitting for years with various sufferers, travelers, newlyweds, and adventurers; people who complain about their narrow existence and curse their destinies, preparing themselves all the while for the long trip. If all those dead with whom I sat at this restaurant table where we celebrated Zosia's wedding with two portions of ham and eggs and lemonades—if all those dead were to reappear in your office together, they would fill it to overflowing. This whole unsympathetic building, this entire city block, would swarm with an endless procession of the dead. The columns of the dead would march from all sides. There would be a sudden burst of their voices, and everybody would be frightened by their countless numbers. They would carry us along with them like a powerful deluge. They are marching, streaming, drumming all around us, doctor. Don't you hear them? They are rattling with their arms, they are whistling, doctor!"

And, in fact, a company of soldiers was thunderously marching at this very moment on the street below, accompanied by the rattling of windows. The company paraded stiffly and vigorously, wearing their helmets and carrying flags. The doctor glanced at me sympathetically from behind his glasses with a friendly and pitying look. He then commented with a condescending smile that these were not dead people, but an ordinary group of soldiers marching by.

"Yes, doctor, I know, these are just soldiers. But they are soldiers returning from a funeral. They served there as the honor guard. For the time being, only one of them is dead, doctor."

"You are not exactly an unintelligent person, you know, and you can readily understand that there is always dying going on in

life. That's only natural. Life is a sort of pendulum swinging between two beats: one we call life, the other death."

"Yes, I know. But one of them, you see, suffered from angina pectoris. Whenever he ate an orange he had to take a deep breath. He used to tell me that his breathing difficulty came from angina pectoris. As I see it, that's approximately the same thing you wanted to explain to me with your pendulum. We die because that is the law of nature. But tell me, how is it possible that the very night there was guitar playing and singing going on in my room, a man living in the room next to mine poisoned himself? Never, neither before nor after this particular event, had anyone ever sung at my place. And yet that very night my guests were singing and a girl strummed on a guitar. And then we heard a din and uproar in the next room. When we got there, everything was over with; all that we saw in the semidark room was a yellow bedspread, the flickering light of a candle, and the lower jaw of the dead man properly bound with a napkin. We could also hear sobbing.

"I remember one fellow with a face covered with pockmarks. He was repellently ugly, a drunkard, strange and somber. No one knows why he died so young. On the other hand, another one was so old—old as a cawing crow. I don't know why, but whenever I recall him I always see a picture of a meadow on a quiet summer afternoon. This meadow is bathed in crystal-clear light, and from the distant vineyard one can hear the twitter of birds and the song of crickets in the tall uncut grass. And I've never been with this man on a sun-drenched meadow. In his apartment there were fruit preserves in his cupboards, and the smell of a cat. He personified for me all that is unpleasant in life, all that smacks of senile decrepitude. And yet, whenever I remember him, there surges in me a veritable flood of summer sounds and summer joys, accompanied by little light clouds and the twitter of birds.

"I took leave of several men in a field of mud. We were all

solemn and gloomy, afraid of the cannons; we were covered with dirt and full of bitterness. As we retreated through the mire, there was in the air that feeling that departure would be difficult and ominous, like a retreat into total oblivion. Night after night I spent with companions at tables covered with tablecloths soiled with ashes and spilled wine. We sat in the smoky, damp basement rooms, the walls of which were decorated with stuffed birds that seemed to flutter on their perches; next to these were gold-framed pictures depicting a Moor telling a white lady stories of his adventures. If one were to collect all that we babbled in wine and smoke and in the turmoil of disturbed digestions, one would accumulate clouds of thoughts—projects and dreams that issued from us like sweat and were, to be sure, nothing but vapor and fume rising from our intoxicated heads.

"What's at the bottom of all this, doctor? I am tired, I've had enough of the war, I've also boozed quite a bit and I am weary of working in offices for meager salaries. Besides that, there is one basic thought that gnaws in me incessantly: in the end we'll all die, and we'll die before our own and final death. So many have died before us, and their rooms, their childhood birthday celebrations with cakes and new toys, their books and words, the glimmer of candles on the ceilings of their rooms, and the ringing of their doorbells—all this continues to stir and live within me. Their memory of my voice and movements dies with them; the memory of them continues to live in my visions. But that which in me belongs to them, and the part that has belonged to me but is now with them, can hardly be separated. All this seems to be woven together in a way that is strangely alive; it surges and flows interchangeably; it becomes part of my circulatory system and part of my heartbeat. And then, when one of these days this froglike gland I call my heart stops puffing, all these shadows will finally become faint, they will grow dimmer, and fade away at the end like an unpleasant odor exuding from a casket that's been kept closed too long. But as long as I am breathing and moving, I remain irresistibly chained

to my dead. And in that enormous procession in which I too am ordained to march, these countless shapes of the deceased are basically only my forerunners. They have just departed according to another train schedule.

"I recall, for instance, that dear, pale, lithe, fatally wounded ensign who slept in the Red Cross train in the berth above me. It was October, nineteen sixteen, and the train was going from Galicia to Vienna. The ensign tore me from my sleep, asking me to hand him the urine bottle. I was still drowsy and confused, trying to orient myself; and when I finally managed to get up and hand him the bottle, he filled it to the brim with a liquid as clear as distilled water. Then, bowing his head, he automatically fell asleep again. Only judging by the monotonous and lifeless up-and-down swaying of his boyish hand that followed in a regular rhythm the forward movement of the train could one discern that he had fallen into that final slumber from which he was no longer to wake. He died filled with pictures of my childhood that I had painted for him a few minutes before his death without ever suspecting I was confiding in a dying man. And thus the death of this unknown young man was simultaneously the death of my childhood. I now seriously doubt whether all those memories of my childhood will ever again be filled with such intensive life as they were that night when I sat vigil at the deathbed of an unknown boy. I poured out my heart to him, as if I somehow knew my voice would penetrate through the lobe of this dying ear way down to the depths of those realms that are not one iota more mysterious than our daily reality, but are just as unknown to us.

"Many of my dead disappeared even before we had a chance to talk to one another. Now we are forever separated by strange, unspoken words that often appear to us—at night—like questions to which there are no answers. An almost total darkness separates them from me, just as the rows of trees beneath a clouded darkened sky separate a train engine from one's view though one hears its whistling from the distance. But many

others we still remember from long ago with the same hatred we had for those conditional clauses in our Latin lessons that seemed to have been put together with such fiendish confoundedness that, much as we tried, we were absolutely unable to grasp them.

"When someone from our circle of acquaintances leaves us and we find out he is no longer alive, we cold-bloodedly tear him from the list of the living the way we tear off the leaves of a calendar. We simply bow our heads in helpless resignation before the inevitable. There are also fresh dead in our consciousness, fresh as the impressions received from the surprises in the morning paper. There are those, on the other hand, who appear as wilted as old bills we are not sure we have paid. I once ate doughnuts with one such dead man. It was a carnival night. We drank brandy; the war was on. A south wind brought about a sudden change in the weather and suddenly he was gone. All I can recall today is a small indistinct detail: he was lying in bed with an inflamed throat; a wet blanket was stretched above his head so that he wouldn't catch pneumonia, but he was already dead. His room was on the street level and the steps of passersby could be heard. I had to think about his favorite food: roast turkey with dumplings and sour cream."

"This is all very nice, my friend, all these details are quite interesting and very informative, but so far we've been unable to establish from our conversations when it was, exactly, that this interesting idea first appeared to you. The idea, namely, that the dead live with us, and that they live in such a way that their lives become more important to us than our own?"

"That was in Paris, more than three years ago, sometime in the beginning of autumn. If you are really interested, doctor, I can tell you about it. I remember every single detail distinctly, even the most unimportant—at least unimportant at first sight.

"Autumn in Paris is usually mild and quiet, but that particular fall the air was full of the smell of dead game, accompanied by the scent of wet forests and far-off places. In the ancient

narrow streets in the shadow of the tower of Saint-Germain suddenly appeared an unusually large quantity of skinned hares and shot pheasants. The sickly color of their transparently blue, mother-of-pearl eyes was an unpleasant reminder of gray death. The masses of dark-violet skinned tendons and bloody necks were everywhere. The necks seemed stuffed with comic rabbit faces that looked like the faces of good-natured, slightly idiotic *bon vivants* framed with fur collars—the only thing missing was a monocle and, of course, the posthumous honors due to respectable citizens of high rank. Tell me, what else could a neurotic wanderer think of at the sight of this bloody slaughter steaming in those sooty streets like a symbol of an early city autumn, but the empty irrationality of a rabbit's life? And beyond this, reflect about that strange animal called man, who, believing in God, slaughters thousands of rabbits, and in honor of Saint Catherine of Sienna sells carloads of asters? Anyway, All Saints' Day was coming closer, and you could smell the frying of pancakes in the French households. Cold showers were approaching, and that morning the iron steam-heating pipes started hissing and coughing in the wall of my hotel room. Only the night before, a dog's whining had echoed across the Seine so mournfully, with such deep melancholy—as if life really did have a deeper and more mysterious meaning than that bloody trafficking with dead birds and rabbits.

"In the midst of this mass of bloody eyes of rabbits and pheasants, I sensed someone's glance from the other side of the street. The glance was so penetrating and intense that within the sphere of its mystery lay vistas and horizons of distant unfocused pictures. There, on the sidewalk in front of a coffeehouse, underneath an orange-blue striped awning, sat a gentleman in a rattan chair in the company of a lady. He was drinking through a straw. The lady looked toward me with the greatest interest.

"Misty vapors; distances; autumn in one of those greasy, dirty, narrow streets on the Left Bank, eternally dark gray, like the tarred walls of public pissoirs; somewhere a female voice, accom-

panied by a harmonica, is singing: *Parlez-moi d'amour!*; the sound of the horse's hoofs on the cobbled streets. Pause.

"When did I meet that man? Ten, twenty years ago? Twenty bloody years? Twenty bloody and desperate years, years of wars, shipwrecks, revolutions, entire processions of dead, an unsurveyable horde of living and dead acquaintances. . . . And here, out of that mass of blood-covered rabbits' heads, emerges someone's eye, and it touches me with magnetic brilliance. Could all this be just the by-product of my bad nerves or the figment of my neurotic imagination? Probably only a tourist with his date. He has visited the room in which Oscar Wilde died, or Delacroix's atelier. They are now taking a breather like thousands of other tourists. It is just a play of fate, a perfectly accidental meeting of glances, a moment of self-deception. Really, nothing at all!

"In the shop window at which I stood during this occurrence stood a large aquarium. Brown-striped flatfishes glided and circled soundlessly through the dark-green water, excited by the spraying grapes of oxygen bubbles. Immediately adjoining the fish shop was the window of an antique shop; it resembled a miniature, brightly lit stage. The reflection of a dark-yellow silk lampshade luminously flooded the lavish surface of a golden-threaded gobelin. The tapestry depicted a scene of a wild-boar hunt: a copper-colored twilight of a dusky beech forest; a deep-green turf of the forest clearing forming the background. The clouds, the twilight, the bloody rabbit corpses, the flatfishes in the emerald-green water, the dirge of the harmonica, and above all this, a flash of a single unknown glance. It was like a flare in the darkness, something that lights up for a moment and immediately goes out. Pause. Discreetly, I turned away my glance from the window of the fish shop. Timidly, unnoticeably, without trying to attract attention, I looked across once more to the coffeehouse. Underneath its orange-blue sail the tourist sat there with the lady, immobile, watching me. I still stood in front of the startled fishes that continued to slide noiselessly in their

aquarium back and forth under the foaming cascades of air, between the moss and shells, as if swimming beneath the crystal-clear treetops of a sunken avenue. The stranger, bearded, gray-haired, looking elegant in his basket chair, continued to suck on his straw cold-bloodedly. The young lady with him, a light blond, dressed simply in the English manner, with a cigarette between her lips, was obviously interested in my appearance. In all probability her escort had called me to her attention. She looked with a steady glance toward my side of the street, where the crossing was piled up with baskets of artichokes, oysters, and snails.

"Where and when could I have met this man? I must have met thousands of people in the course of my wanderings, and in that countless row of forgotten eyes, what was this single unknown glance supposed to mean? He may have been a steward on a South-American ship. Was it the ship from which an insane man jumped into the midst of some alligators, and the water around the ship's propeller turned red from blood while the ship continued on its journey as if nothing had happened? Or was this the glance of the Italian soldier who was sipping black coffee from his Thermos bottle on the southwestern front when we surprised him in his machine-gun nest? There is no sense, by the way, in stopping in the middle of the street just because the glance of someone unknown suddenly appears—a glance that may have just as little importance as the look of the dark-metallic flatfish swimming under the cascade of bubbling water. One fish, incidentally, floating in oxygen foam, kept swallowing its own diseased intestine, imagining it to be a worm; it fluttered in its mouth like a rotted mustache.

"Disturbed and restless, I stopped again in front of the antique shop and looked absent-mindedly between the silver baroque candlesticks at a whole series of colored lithographs framed in red mahogany. They had been made in honor of the French imperial visit to the Queen of England. The pictures showed Her Highness, Victoria, the Queen of Great Britain,

standing on marble steps beneath a purple canopy, ready to receive His Majesty, the Emperor Napoleon III. I was just about to turn away and leave when the man from across the street got up and walked toward me. I noticed that his walk was unusually elastic, his trousers perfectly pressed; his decisive, muscular, strong movements were those of an experienced fencer. I looked helplessly toward the blond lady, sitting there beneath the coffeehouse umbrella on the other side of the street.

"Suddenly I felt the man's warm, soft lips pressing against mine. Embraced by this slender man, almost lifted in the air by his bright and noble smile, I suddenly recognized that it was Christian K. Among all of us restless spirits, he was the most flaming, the first professed follower of the philosopher Stirner. He was a star-intoxicated young man, an enthusiast of Christopher Columbus, the fiery eddy of our student days at the Sorbonne. Christian, my old friend, whom I had not seen for twenty years, the witness of my only duel in the forest of Vincennes, my love messenger, my dearest friend! How often had I shared with him a can of sardines in my attic room in the rue Bonaparte, right around the corner of rue Jacob, just a few steps from here. My God, it was Christian, the man from the dark, remote East where strange peoples intermix: Slaves, Gypsies, Mongols, and Bohemians. My intimate friend from Poland, where there have always been shootings and unrest, just as in Ireland. He, who always somehow managed to fraternize in closed, mysterious Russian and Mongolian circles. I remember that he once hid at my place a lady's hatbox containing a few kilograms of explosives covered with moss, and in that moss he placed a live turtle. All night long I listened, filled with fright at the scratching of the turtle in the box. I was convinced we would all be blown into the air—the turtle, rue Jacob, and the old tower at the corner of rue Bonaparte. Dear old K, who was always ready to claim that 'at this particular moment' he had no time, who was always mixed up with at least three women. He also—'just now,' after twenty years—was 'at the moment'

not free, being embroiled in something 'not exactly pleasant.' He told me several times, however, how happy indeed he was to have seen me, that he would be so overjoyed if I could give him the pleasure of coming to a soiree being given that very night at the Polish Embassy.

"I suggested to him that we meet after the soiree, if he did not already have a previous engagement, but he firmly insisted on his original suggestion.

"To be sure, he didn't exactly know whether it would be possible—in spite of his best intentions—to free himself from the scheduled meetings that were supposed to take place during the boring soiree. But he was immeasurably happy that we had met, since this meeting had for him a special surprise—he had, after all, heard I had been killed. He had been convinced I was dead. So when he saw me a few minutes before standing in front of those fishes, he thought he was dreaming, and was unable to recognize me immediately. Time, unfortunately, passes so quickly, we had started loosing our teeth, our beards were getting gray—first unmistakable signs of death. Nevertheless, this shouldn't have meant so much since we could still walk straight. Was I still able to remember his words spoken in the moonlight at the foot of the Lion of Belfort? Did I remember how he bet me a bottle of champagne that Europe, the old whore, had already been sentenced to death? That was on the eve of the European debacle, and I still owed him the bottle of champagne—for I had always been congenitally naïve and had no actual sense of reality.

"Now, that night, there would be an occasion for me to pay this old debt. Ah, did I remember those beautiful moonlights when we used to play the guitar in the cemetery of Montparnasse, and the time when we stole a whole basket of warm madeleines—sadly enough, no longer baked in public—from the fat, niggardly baker in Passy who had breathing difficulties. And could I still remember how once we spent a whole rainy night under the chestnut trees of le boulevard Aragon, just to witness a

guillotine execution of some criminal, but were unable to see anything, hearing only the loud beating of the drums? In a word: he had absolutely no time 'at the moment,' since he was busy with a 'trifling stupidity,' but he positively counted—counted with an absolute certainty—on my not refusing him this small request to meet him tonight. Without regard to any other possibilities, we had to see each other again tonight, even if it were for only a few minutes. For me, after all, it should not be so difficult, since I was free anyway, and as far as he was concerned, he hoped he could somehow manage to extricate himself for at least a few minutes. If it should turn out that he just couldn't get free, we could at least meet tonight and arrange for a meeting at some other time. We could drive out and spend a day in Chantilly at the lake, where we used to shoot at Bonaparte's fat old carps with our revolvers.

"Besides, for him it would not matter if we went to Chantilly or St. Germain, since there was not a corner of those woods not full of memories from our boyhood days. And if I were not personally bound by some kind of business, we could even go to London for three or four days, where he was to purchase some submarines. I would, of course, be his guest. He was here heading a trade mission. The important thing about tonight was that we could arrange all this at the embassy, and it was not at all impossible that he could extricate himself in spite of everything.

"During this flood of words, recollections, handclasps, and enthusiasm—which seemed quite genuine—he pulled his calling card out of his wallet—just in case . . . embassy personnel could be such imbeciles. He wrote a few words on the card, and with joyous gestures, smiling all over, waved it a few times in the air to dry the wet ink. His cordial spontaneity enveloped me, like a storm seizing me completely. Before I was able to ask him a most logical question—what I was supposed to be doing at the soiree—he was already back with his blond lady beneath the coffeehouse awning. He then disappeared into the bustle of the city street with her and her lap dog, in a cloud of gas fumes emanating from a huge and elegant car.

"Fishes, flat and repulsive, were circling in the light green box in the fish shop window, and all around were those bloody hares and dead birds. I continued to stare in bewilderment at the strange calling card that was supposed to open doors for me tonight at the embassy on rue Yokohama."

"Well, did you go to the soiree at the embassy?"

"Of course I went there, doctor."

"And you met your friend there? You identified yourself with his calling card?"

"No, I did not meet him, because he did not appear. They told me that Colonel Christian Kavaljerski had fallen before Warsaw in July, nineteen-twenty. It appeared very strange to them that someone should be looking for him in the Parisian embassy thirteen years after his heroic and legendary death—a death now described in every Polish grammar-school reader."

"And what happened to his calling card? That was a sort of invitation, wasn't it? What did they tell you, when you tried to enter with an invitation from a dead man?"

"I did not show it to anyone. I immediately assumed that no one would believe a word I said and that they could lock me up for a madman."

"Like a simpleton, I'd rather say—someone who fell for a bad joke. Do you have the calling card with you?"

"No, doctor, but I can bring it to you whenever you wish."

In that moment our glances met, and I knew at once that the doctor did not believe a word I said. Being experienced in dealing with people like me, the whole thing seemed to bore him. I could see, though, that he considered me a harmless fool who should be gotten rid of as painlessly and quickly as possible. At this moment I also understood how stupid it is to seek understanding from these gentlemen in white smocks, to seek warm sympathy for what to them are the lies, delusions, and

shadows of our troubled brains. It seemed as if both of us were relieved when we turned to the objective part of our session.

How was it going with my disturbed digestion since our last meeting; was I still constipated; what about my excitability, restlessness, insomnia, apathy, the sudden heart palpitations, headaches, pains in the heel, chronic depression, bad taste in my mouth, feelings of exhaustion caused by smoking, the general absence of appetite, etc., etc.? . . . He wrote a new prescription and, after clipping me for seventy-five dinars for the day's visit, parted from me in a most amiable way at the padded door: goodby, see you soon, I look forward to seeing you again.

Outside, on the street, it was raining. I roamed in the rain in the gloomy light of the gas lanterns, eying the panes of curiously strange curtained windows, and I let myself gradually be filled to the brim, like some cursed vessel, with sighs and tired gestures. To sleep under the arched ceilings of dark sublet rooms, to wander through the muddy, nocturnal, and distant streets, getting more and more tired, listening to the sobbing of the rain, buying medicine, waiting in the pharmacy—that is essentially how the life of a small-town man exhausts itself.

Old tree trunks—black at first sight and incomprehensible, like all revolting, demoniacally deformed phenomena of our reality—these deaf-and-dumb tree trunks stood along the rainy avenues, repulsive and horrible, like diseased prostates or old smoked, puffed-up pigs' intestines hanging in the windows of the butcher's store. And the rain splashes on those swollen, horny elephant legs made of sticky threads of tar, and in the rain, all around the inky trunks of this tree-lined avenue, appears a soggy catastrophe. Rotting pieces of fruit, soaked newspapers blaring a picture of a girl run over by a train, dog tracks, sodden cigarette butts, they all float on the watery surface of the sidewalk as on a sooty mirror where everything exists only for the moment. This moment seems to be as brief as the echo of a distant, unknown sound welling up into innumerable circles and disappearing, the way a drop of rain arrives simply and naturally

from inconceivable heights and circles restlessly around a squashed orange, then slides across the smutted asphalt, to surge again into the underworld where dirty waters rush and gurgle deep beneath our feet.

Beer houses have a smell of decay even on sunny days, and human habitations are filled with the stench of urinals and old unventilated closets. And yet nothing in the world seems to be as sad as the sight of a white satin shoe in the glass case of a shoe store in the rain. That maidenly white forlorn object, pointed and old-fashioned, with high heels, the dream of all brides—along with the white dress in the picture of the first communion—stands in its glass box in the rain, lit up like the glass coffin of Snow White. It stands there in the rain abandoned, cut off from the restless bustle around it, and as hopelessly isolated, as inexpressibly unreal as is thrown-away and forgotten reality. It is raining harder and harder, and everything around is sad and sodden: the horses, the sparrows in the treetops, and even the lonely monument standing in the damp shadow of the fir trees.

The grimy windowpanes look so gray that all those rooms appear like drowned realms, unfathomably sunk to the bottom where time has stopped and nothing moves. The submerged rooms stand there, glass-framed in the rain, resembling empty, illuminated boxes.

Among them one stands out, plain and unsightly, a woman's white shoe made of silk. The rain is falling on the old roofs of the incredibly idiotic-looking houses. It cascades down the roof tiles, along the gutters, on the ancient attics and deserted balconies. A waterdrop, like a tear, is running down the plaster cheek of the blind girl's head right over the main entrance to the staircase. The tiny drop snakes along the plaster hairdo and slides along the cold, classically proportioned cheek of this masklike female face decorated with a laurel wreath, standing upright and lofty, above all this terrestrial activity. Crouched tightly against the tragic female form, a soaked pigeon with its head protectively covered by its wing endures the rain. Who has

built these little towns, now deserted, with all their symmetrical promenades, their ridiculous balconies and unlit dwellings, their autumn rains and unbearable boredoms? The small town stands in the rain—extinct, with no one around, absolutely no one. Only the rain is heard rustling through the dark veil of the dusk.

A man passes by along the empty row of trees. He carries a package and he moans. His cigarette leaves behind it a trail of warm smoke that disappears in the twilight like a horizontal line. A smell of tired feet trails after the passer-by, an odor of an unwashed body, of rain-soaked rags and stale smoke. He passes by with his packages and vanishes along the row of trees toward the waiting room of the railroad station. The station's high windows are bathed in orange light, and the whole building, heated, steamy, full of moldy vapor, looks like a huge hothouse in which exotic fleshy plants bloom. The tired passer-by, his head bowed, departs, huge and dark, as if carrying his own tombstone. And the stone's inscription reads: "He lived; he traveled; he moved around carrying packages through insignificant, unknown towns, departing one day to a place of no return." And all this time he was occupied with his last unhealthy thought that he could have washed his feet but had not done so, though he intended to and had thought about how good and necessary that would have been. And yet he took leave from this earth dirty and unwashed, just the way he had lived in dirt and the way it had been written in the books from the beginning of time. No trace was left of this tired anonymous man except, perhaps, a melancholy shadow in our brains.

He, however, departed for some distant place into an azure, pastel-green sunlit realm where a kind of radiant city stands bathed in the crystal glow of an eternal summer day. There, ants crawl among their hills, cats dream in warm shadows, sparrows twitter, and from a balcony flutters a dark-blue silk flag, decorated with the Swedish cross, transparent as a woman's blouse, its diminutive, ever tinier pleats creating in the quiet summer blaze a coolness as refreshing as the plashing of a fountain.

"And what in the world are you doing in this rain?"

"Nothing, really. I am indulging in fancies about a dead summer. I am mourning for a summer that will, unfortunately, never return. Besides, I am waiting for the medicine that's getting made up in the pharmacy. I am on a cure, you know. And I am bored."

"Good evening, anyway. I am always happy to see you. And as to your mourning for a lost summer, that's not so unintelligent after all. It's been years since I enjoyed a really decent summer, one worthy of a human being. Generally speaking, such a summer doesn't exist at all. Summer is an illusion—an illusion that is already dead by the tenth or eleventh grade. From a single plaintive buzz of a fly around a coffeehouse window you can experience in the midst of winter all the forest meadows, distant blue views, cowbells, mountains, and sheep much more keenly than you can during that early summer of silly boyhood when one goes through one's first gonorrhea. On the whole, what does 'summer' really mean to us big-city neurotics? Unwashed windowpanes, bare curtain rods, moth-balled rugs, paper lanterns in the windows of stationery stores, perhaps two or three drinks with other drifters. Tell me, can anything in this entire cosmos be less meaningful and more miserable than a summer Sunday afternoon in our little town? Indeed, is there anybody alive who could fathom—in a higher cosmic sense—a deeper meaning in one of our summer Sunday afternoons? And especially when the streets are literally flooded with such hellish creatures—such as the picture of housemaids in their black frame?"

"And I, you see, was reflecting only a minute ago on how sad a woman's lonely white shoe is in the shoemaker's window in the rain. It seemed to me as if that shoe was the saddest thing in the world."

"You are right. Your shoe is sadder than my photographs. That's true. Even this bronze statue of a monk on its granite pedestal doesn't feel comfortable in this rain. But just imagine this monk, bareheaded as he is, with a book in his hand, ninety-

eight degrees in the shade, completely exposed to the broiling sun. And right around him petite secretaries are licking their ice-cream cones. That's even more unpleasant. And you, you said you were waiting to get your medicine concocted. Did you go to L.W.? I just visited him myself. He told me about your case. You know we are colleagues at the clinic. Now he is my benefactor. He supports me, so to speak—he does quite a few things for me. He is a total idiot as far as medicine is concerned. Let the medicine he prescribed go to hell. Come on, let's get a pint of good red wine, which is, I bet, far more effective."

The person speaking was Dr. Siroček, who is a case in himself. Dr. Siroček is an acquaintance of mine. Our relationship is—how should I say?—rather delicate. Truly speaking, we got acquainted by meeting in the men's rooms of our abominable drinking dives. Yes, we met in the depressing, coarse, inevitably alcoholic dinginess of our local boozing dens in which one gets drunk just to deaden one's sense of reasoning and poison the heart. From an urge for self-destruction, a man laps up his poison in order to die like a dog as soon as possible. And in this way we get rid of all our depressions, all our stupidities, our nihilism. In a word, our existence as such. For years I've been meeting Dr. Siroček in those nauseating places where there is an eternal stench of tar and pitch, and where across the blackened walls the curtain of water splashes and falls in this human life. Indeed, sometimes it seems as if the whole universe is made of a huge, water-swelled bladder, and that through us all this flows from the clouds into rivers and brooks and city sewers. If one really thinks about it, it begins to seem as if our earthly existence has no purpose other than to become a net of fleshy, bladdery arteries, a kind of heavenly plumbing system through which the water that poured from above flows into porcelain bowls. And we, on the other hand, drift on the bottom of the cloudy mess like so many water bubbles. We bloom there like pale underwater flowers, damp and blind; drunk or sober, completely con-

fused; drowning in greater and greater pain in our own puddles of tears or in the puddles created by our loose bladders.

There we met for years, the unfortunate Dr. Siroček and I, with a mathematical precision, always on the same spot. During such all too-human situations we would exchange, like two exhausted mermen, a couple of empty, drab, insignificant, almost totally conventional phrases. Then we would return to our wine and smoke, back to the tavern and the fumes of our tables.

In the beginning I had a certain feeling that Dr. Siroček was one of those well-meaning, kind, and harmless people who are destined—mathematically calculated—to be run down. Through this pale, talented, poetical, but unstable personality, who was often somewhat confused as well as inconsistent in his views and opinions—through this drunken individual the belly spoke more often than the brain. And the voices of this invisible ventriloquist would speak from the depths of Dr. Siroček's digestive system, sounding more gruntlike than human. And yet, in spite of his glassy stare and trembling hand, in spite of the burning cigarette that seemed eternally glued to his lower lip, and in spite of those voices from his intestines and drunken belly, this Dionysiac would mumble a mixture of reason and nonsense about himself and his higher calling. Enveloped by alcoholic fumes, he would mutter in the midst of our puddle with such enthusiasm and self-assurance that his drunken monologues echoed in my head like some unforgettable musical theme. Once, for instance, standing erect in that glorious Adam posture, helpless as a newborn baby, he told me a story that he had written about a naked woman. According to his own testimony, he rewrote the story, word by word, seventeen times and he was still dissatisfied with it. He was dissatisfied, he said, because he was not able to hit on the right description of the naked woman's movements while she was squatting before a wash basin, rinsing her belly with a sponge. When the story appeared in one of our magazines, Dr. Siroček attracted consider-

able notice. The unanimous judgment seemed to have been that he was crazy, and that his writing—under various pseudonyms—was typical of the literature of lunacy.

In his civilian profession Dr. Siroček was a physician, a man for whom "a most brilliant academic career" was predicted. At twenty-six, he had already achieved a fine reputation as assistant to an international celebrity in Paris, by publishing in various scientific magazines. There was even a scientific-medical method of some specialized nerve cut honored with his name. Then, suddenly, this famous bearer of a scientific predicate got lost in his glorious ascent. He became involved with some shady women and turned into a thoroughgoing alcoholic. One day he "beat the hell out of his Herr Professor" from Berlin and had to spend a few years in various sanatoria. He returned to our provincial nest a total wreck. Here, too, he was unable to get a solid footing as a general practitioner because somehow he always got entangled with dubious patients. In addition, he quarreled through newspapers, continuously exalting the high calling of medicine while he physically insulted one of our best-known doctors, a medical professor and a local celebrity. Because of this, he went to the insane asylum for observation. And now he gets drunk in dingy pubs, drinking cheap local wine, starving himself occasionally in order to publish fragments of his unorthodox and confused prose.

Dr. Siroček is a sort of street poet now, living from the handouts of his ex-colleagues. They, for their part, treat him the same way parents treat their lost children who prefer eating out of pigs' troughs to eating from the richly set tables of their orderly, middle-class patriarchal homes.

He let me know that Dr. L.W.—who has been treating me for more than a year now—did indeed tell him all about "my case." Dr. Siroček had paid him a visit just a few minutes after I had left because he wanted to borrow a few dinars. Now he would be interested to hear how I interpreted "my case" since,

after all, Dr. L.W. was a simple idiot, a fact about which there should be no doubt, and about which any debate would be entirely superfluous. Sitting now among the kegs and barrels in the wine cellar that looked like some underground pirate den, Dr. Siroček and I had already polished off the second quart of red wine after my return from the pharmacy with the medicine Dr. L.W. had prescribed anew for me. After that, "my case" was not only "mine" but also "his"; they became two "identical cases." The identity of "our" cases was important not only for us as "patients," but also in respect to the total surrounding in which we happened to live, and which could be characterized as still belonging to the troglodyte, cannibalistic Stone Age.

"Let's see now, you are bothered by your dead people like some old governesses, and on account of that those idiots are massaging your prostate! There you see the perfect example of our 'science.' Your basic idea—that we die before our death in the conscience of those who died before us—is the most normal, most fundamental, and most logical idea of every reflection about death, even the most primitive. A pilgrimage should be made from grave to grave, and above the mounds of the immense misery of those snuffed-out lives a candle of perception and experience should be lit. All those deceased—t.b. cases, widows, beggars, and all those murdered on operating tables—had something to say to us, to enlighten us with one or two honest words. And every light, even the smallest, emanating from the wisdom of the deceased could illuminate our darkness. Then this darkness in us, our incapacity to communicate with strangers, would appear less alien and less unintelligible, since it would turn out that our experiences are not so dissimilar after all, even though at first sight they may seem so. They have already passed their final test, and by learning from their experience, we could conclude that the examination we have to face may not be as difficult as it seems to us, coming as we do with not entirely clean conscience before this final and stupid exami-

ning board. As far as doctors are concerned, this is, of course, an unhealthy way to think, and the neurologists brand it as downright crazy. Everything that shows even a shade of lofty inspiration is considered by our great specialists, like Dr. L.W., a 'pathological case.'

"Incidentally, everything here is a huge heap of garbage and junk. Our so-called 'science,' too, is just ordinary garbage. I don't know whether you noticed the fact—a very obvious one by the way—that we generally build on the mound of garbage and junk. Truck drivers come with their trucks full, and they raise our urban level by bringing in more and more garbage: old tin washbowls, torn sacks, pulp, rusty spoons, disintegrating hatboxes, and smelly rags that reek of burned cotton. Then pavilions of our autonomous home-grown culture are built upon these rusty washbowls, foot lockers, and all kinds of refuse and bales of rotten newspapers. And our civilization lives in these tents built from old sacks and decayed toothbrushes, in these gypsy pads made of plaster and tattered rags, in these huts and mudholes. And here too is located, among other things, our medical science. Here also live in a mandarin-like stance all our authorities. And though I don't want to be a prophet of evil tidings, pay sharp attention to what I am telling you now: All this stands like a theater backdrop made out of paper that waits only for the first blow of a strong wind and the whistling of a bomb. Then everything will be as it was before—old perforated washbowls, holed-out rusty cash registers, beaten-up piss pots, and empty tin cans. All our fortresses built on newspaper will be gone with the wind, and no one will know that once any of this existed. Our citizens wipe their behinds with newspaper and thus consume their own glory.

"You know that I wrote all this to the gentleman in charge and that is why they committed me. How can I fight against the mechanical blare of our science when my name is entered on the list of patients in the insane asylum? I declared to them publicly, under my full signature as a doctor, that if a single superficial glance is thrown at our surgery, our laryngology, or neurology, it would immediately be seen that taken together, from a scientific point of view, we have nothing but lowly clerks trying to fill the boots of generals. And as far as the international forum is concerned, we just do not count; in the eyes of European science we are still considered to be nothing but a most backward province. Our experimental researches, our original discoveries, our scientific initiative are equal to a great big zero. I am not, you see, impressed by small provincial practitioners wrapped in their academic gowns; I am not impressed by plagiarists, who are far more occupied with playing politics than with science. And I wrote to them all that they have become a bunch of commercial agents of big drug manufacturers, big European cartels. By the way, let me please see for a second what your genius prescribed for you."

I handed Dr. Siroček the prescription given to me by Dr. L.W. He scanned it with ironic contempt, like a stern professor taking into his hands the written work of a notoriously bad student. "Well now, let's see!

"℞. Infusi Sennae 30.0
Natrii Sennae 30.0
Natrii chlorati ana 30.0
5–3 x daily
2–1 spoonfuls
Gardenal pills
½ 3 x daily
Probilin p.
3–4 2 x daily
a. Evenings before bed
b. Mornings, 1 hour before breakfast
Natrii chlorati 15.0
Natrii sulfurici 40.0

Natrii bicarbonici 50.0
Kalii sulfurici 5.0
M.F.p. 110.0
D.S. ½ tsp. in ½ cup boiled water
with pills A.M. and P.M.
Coffeini natriosalicylici 0.15
Ergotini Bonjouani 0.2
Acidi acetylosalycylici 0.4
in capsulisanylaceis
D.D. No. 15
D.S. after each meal."

Dr. Siroček again scanned the rather detailed prescription, for which I had paid the pharmacy 176 dinars and 70 paras. He then touched my hand with his long spiderlike fingers discolored by tobacco—their tips were as cold as cocaine.

"How much did you pay that quack?"

"Seventy-five dinars."

"Which means that altogether you paid 251 dinars for this quack prescription. A famous doctor once said that the only difference between a physician and a veterinarian is in his patients. Do you know what he prescribed for you? Nothing but laxatives. Senna, you see, is an extract that has an effect on the smooth musculature of the intestines and promotes bowel movement. He has prescribed for you such a sacramental diarrhea that you'll lose your mind if you try to swallow this Egyptian nonsense. Trachoma is treated with it in Senegal and Egypt. Folia sennae are pale green leaves that feel woolly and cotton-soft when you touch them. They come from a tropical plant with yellow flowers, the odor of which can be rather penetrating. It has chubby fruit as sticky as hawthorn berry and is called manna—heavenly, Biblical manna. Once at the Parisian flea market I heard a Senegalese recommending it as the best remedy against gonorrhea. As you see, there is divided opinion about the healing power of this asinine remedy even among the

scientists. And you probably don't suffer from constipation at all."

"Not really. I rather suffer from a chronic diarrhea."

"Just unbelievable. Simply unbelievable. Gardenal pills are, by the way, ordinary junk—a strictly commercial sell of the aspirin line. Probilin, on the other hand, is a preparation that promotes gall secretion. Natrium and kalium are headache cures. And what do you take when you have a headache?"

"Veramon."

"Of course. What the hell do you need a 'half teaspoon in a half cup of boiled water—together with probilin pills evening and morning'? You don't suffer from headaches but from nervous melancholy depressions. Probably because of an irregular sex life. When was the last time you slept with a woman?"

"About six months ago."

"You see. What you need, my friend, is a woman, and not that 'half teaspoonful' stuff. He is totally mad, that Dr. L.W. He's the one who should be locked up in the asylum—and as soon as possible. But I don't want to get too excited. I told these gentlemen once and for all, and I wrote them with my full signature, so why am I getting excited? Anyone who gets excited on account of those idiots doesn't deserve anything better than to be put in a strait jacket.

"Just take a look at this: Natrium sulphate promotes the functioning of the liver, and if you stuff yourself with so much sulphur paste, you'll ruin your disgestion so thoroughly that even the best wine won't be able to cure you any more. If you were to follow this prescription you'd spend the next three weeks doing nothing but running five or six times to the toilet and gulping three large teaspoonsful of that junk daily. All that is prescribed there, to be taken five times a day, mornings and nights, before and after meals, you could take in a form of simple aspirin or some harmless medicated candy that children take against worms. What did you say you paid that nincompoop? Seventy five dinars? I touched him for a hundred, which means

it was your money he gave me, and now we'll drink it away. Waiter, another quart of red wine."

Like a purebred dog with taut nerves, Dr. Siroček jumped with a single leap toward a small iron stove that was steaming, all aglow, in the corner of the pub. With an elegant gesture he threw into the oven the package containing the medicine that was lying in front of him on an upturned barrel. Then he returned and tapped me on the shoulder with a triumphant gesture of a staunch old confidant.

"Well, that stupidity is done with. And now, my friend, you owe it to your health to find yourself a woman. Here comes the other bottle of wine. To your health!"

We now proceeded to get drunk, while Dr. Siroček talked all night long about women. He explained to me that women are like overripe decaying figs, and that all of us get stuck in this female fruit, digging into its moldering flesh. And not a single one of us has the courage to admit we are just strewn caterpillars that know only how to cling to these tainted figs like excited worms. And so our time passes in this worm-eaten rot while the cannons continue to thunder all around us, and we go on for centuries slaughtering one another. In this bloody pathos of cannon-thunder and trumpet-blaring, he, Dr. Siroček, is clearly conscious of only one thing: He senses fear, and he feels how comforting it would be to crawl into the chaos of the female uterus, just as in the remote past, in some distant place, he had flowed out of it. It was a long time ago, on some feathery cushions, in darkness, accompanied by the creaking of the bed and the whistling of the wind; snow was falling, wet and muddy, sticky and misty, enveloping him in an infinite emptiness.

His personal life is wretchedly stupid and miserable. It consists, on the one hand, of the infinitely cold and empty ringing of churchbells—which chime in honor of some turgid, hundred-headed doctrine that seems strangely difficult to interpret—and, on the other, of women who lately circle around him. One of these women has tubercular glands and wears black stockings;

her name is Musja. She works as a waitress somewhere on the edge of town where the military barracks are situated and where the lower military ranks come daily for their stew. No one else in the entire female cosmos but this tubercular Musja seems to possess the mysterious uterus toward which Dr. Siroček crawls like a snail. He inches into her interior, which opens to him like some gigantic, superterrestrial, Dante-esque underground.

"It is warm in those women's bellies. A man could let himself drown in those dusks, disintegrate as a human being, cease being, transform himself into something that, measured by his dignity, is tinier and more babbling than a newborn baby wrapped in diapers. One should crawl back into primeval matter and transmute oneself into a kind of cosmic, slippery slime that exists just on the level of the blissful sense of the warmth of the uterus. And then he should finally shrink to something without reason, without logic, without memory. What is left is a deaf-mute state of the warm flesh, without even the slightest thought of death, of transitoriness, of the dead among us and the entire artificially constructed reality around us. For what, indeed, is real in our daily lives? Streets? Are the streets actually a phenomenon of reality? Telephones? Wine pubs? The whole bureaucratic net enmeshing all this? The motion of my inflamed lungs? I move through the streets completely unrecognized, as unnoticed as if I were totally invisible. In actuality I am transparent and I flash with green sparks like the retort of an electric transformer, and I converse with stars, singing like my cricket down there in the pissoir.

"Yes, I discovered a cricket in the men's room, my dear fellow; down there in the men's room I discovered a cricket. Underneath the waterfall that splashes over the putrid black-tarred wall, where the citron slices float and the smell of ammonia bites our nostrils as in some laboratory, right down there at the very dregs of the human stench, one night I heard the voice of the cricket. There wasn't even a dog in the pub, the wind roared like a wild beast, and in the stench of the men's room

was a voice of the ripe summer, the redolence of August, the breath of meadows surging like green velvet: the voice of the cricket out of the urine and feces, the voice of nature that transforms even stinking city toilets into starry sunsets, when the mills are softly humming in the russet horizon, and first crickets announce themselves as the harbingers of an early autumn. Here, you see, I've brought him some bread crumbs. Come, let's pay him a visit."

Helpless as a child, Dr. Siroček pulled out of his pocket a handful of bread crumbs and stood there motionless, the palm of his hand outstretched in a poignant gesture; he stood rather a long time, as if in a trance, his eyes sparkling with tears.

In the men's room the cricket did not appear. The silence was interrupted only by the splashing of the water draining like a trembling curtain over the surface of the tarred wall.

With pricked-up ears, with a look that seemed to be lost beyond all that we in this world designate as reality, Dr. Siroček endured for a while in that hell of acid. He stood there with his head bowed, and then, with a gesture of his hand, he flipped the burning cigarette butt, which crackled loudly and extinguished itself in the water.

"We are all butts in the urine," he uttered sentimentally, dispersing the crumbs by turning his left pocket inside out. Then he brushed off the remaining crumbs with his left hand, like a dog scratching behind its ear.

Translated by Frank S. Lambasa

Devil's Island

For three years Gabriel Kavran had not been home. When he did return one night, his very own father, old Kavran, couldn't believe it was his son. It was carnival season and it seemed to the old man that this must be someone in costume who had shown up to frighten him! This pale corpse with deep, inflamed eye sockets; this bald, gray-haired, snaggle-toothed head, this ragged skeleton, this beggar whose bare flesh showed through tattered trousers—was this his only son, Gabriel? That strong, full-blooded bull, that hard-headed jackass who had fought with him at knifepoint and broken a chair over his head? It's a thief, a ghost, some tramp who has made his way in in order to kill him! And the eyes aren't Gabriel's! This face is a painted mask!

"What kind of stupid joke is this? Wipe that chalk off your snout! I recognize you!" The old man walked toward Gabriel, who was sitting hunched over on the couch. At that moment it