



Bohumil Hrabal

**Why
I Write?**

Translated by David Short

Why I Write?

And Other Early Prose Pieces

Bohumil Hrabal

Translated from the Czech by David Short

Published by Charles University,
Karolinum Press

Ovocný trh 5/560, Prague 1, Czech Republic

Cover and graphic design by Zdeněk Ziegler

Typesetting by Karolinum Press

First English edition

© Karolinum Press, 2019

Text © Bohumil Hrabal - heirs c/o Dilia, 2019

Translation © David Short, 2019

This edition and notes © Jiří Pelán and David Short, 2019

Illustrations © Jiří Grus, 2019

ISBN 978-80-246-4268-0 (hb)

ISBN 978-80-246-4324-3 (ebk)



Charles University
Karolinum Press 2019

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz





CONTENTS

Why I write? /9
Those Rapturous Riflemen /19
Cain /49
Trapezium Number Two /97
The House that Refreshed Itself in a Flash /105
The Feast of Sts Philip and James /115
Scribes and Pharisees /125
No Escape /133
The Glorious Legend of Wantoch /137
The Sufferings of Old Werther /149
Protocol /237
A Schizophrenic Gospel /243
A January Story /265
A February Story /272
One Great Guy /285
Atom Prince /313
The Gabriel Explosion /321
Made in Czechoslovakia /335
Blitzkrieg /349
Meetings by Chance and by Design /355
Line No. 23a /387
One Pretty Nondescript Station /395
A Christening /406
Be Expecting Me /419
Toy Shop /425
Everyday Chit-Chat /427

A Woman in Love /435
One Ordinary Day /463

Notes /480

Editorial Note /515

About the Author /518

About the Translator /519

WHY I WRITE?

Until the age of twenty I had no idea what writing was, what literature was. At high school I consistently fell at every hurdle in Czech language and had to repeat years one and four, so extending my adolescence by two years... After twenty, that first solid plank of my ignorance snapped and I then fell headlong for literature and art, so much so that reading and looking and studying became my hobby. And to this day I am kept in a state of permanent euphoria by the writers I came to cherish in my youth, and I know by heart François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*,¹ and even Louis Céline's *Death on Credit*² and the verse of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and I'm still reading Schopenhauer and my latest teacher, Roland Barthes... But at the age of twenty my real inspiration was Giuseppe Ungaretti, who so impressed me that I started writing poetry... Thus did I set foot on the thin ice of writing and the force that drove my writing was the sheer delight at the sentences that dripped from my soul onto the pages in my Underwood typewriter, and I was bowled over by the chain being strung together from that first sentence on, so I began keeping an intimate diary, my self-addressed *billets doux*, my self-addressed monologue combined with interior monologue... And I had a constant sense that what I was writing was mine and mine alone and that I'd succeeded in setting down on those blank sheets something that was quite an honour, but simultaneously startling. Back then, whenever my mother's friends and neighbours asked how I was getting on with my legal

studies, she would just brush it aside saying that “his mind’s forever on other things”... And that’s how it was, back then I was obsessed with writing, a young man in gestation: the only thing I looked forward to was the weekend, when I would return from Prague to Nymburk,³ and the main thing was that, back then, it was so quiet in the office of the brewery and I could spend a whole two days at my Underwood, and having written the first sentence I’d brought with me from Prague, I could sit at the typewriter and wait, fingers held aloft, until that first sentence gave birth to the next... Sometimes I might wait an hour or more, but at other times I wrote so fast that the typewriter jammed and stuttered, so mighty was the stream of sentences... and that flow, that rate of flow of the sentences kept assuring me that “this is it”... And so I wrote for the sheer pleasure of writing, for that kind of euphoria in which, though sober, I showed signs of intoxication... And so I wrote according to the law of reflection, the reflection of my crazy existence... I was actually still only learning to write and my writing amounted to exercises, variations on Apollinaire and Baudelaire, later on I had a go, under the guidance of Céline, at the stream of city talk and then it was the turn of Izaak Babel and in time Chekhov and they all taught me to reflect in my writing not only my own self, but the world about me, to approach myself from inside others... and to know what destiny is. And then came the war and the universities were closed⁴ and I ended up spending the war as a train dispatcher and new encroachers on my writing were Breton’s *Nadja* and the *Surrealist Manifestos*... and every Saturday and Sun-

day, in the deserted office of the Nymburk brewery, I carried on writing my marginal notes on things I'd seen and things that had befallen others, I was frightened, but also honoured to have become, by writing, an eye witness, a poetic chronicler of the hardships of wartime, and at the same time, having spent so many years writing on that Underwood of the bleakness and brutality of reality, to have been forced gradually to let go of my adolescent versifying and replace it with a woeful game played with sentences that tended towards the transcendent... and so I went on setting down my self-addressed, interior monologue, but without commentary, and so, being my own first reader, I could have a sense, gazing at those pages of text, that they'd been written by someone else... and I have continued to feel it an honour that I was able to write at all, that I could testify to that huge event in my life, that I was at last able to start thinking thanks to my typewriter... And so I carried on writing as if I were hearing the confession not only of me myself, but of the entire world... And I continued to see the driving force of my writing in that fact of being an eye witness and in the duty to note and set down all the things that excited me, pleasant and disturbing, and the duty to offer, by way of my typewriter, testimony not on every single event, but on certain nodes of reality, as if I were squirting cold water on an aching tooth... But I saw that, too, as a divine game, as taught to me by Ladislav Klíma...⁵ And then the war came to an end and I completed my studies to become a Doctor of Laws, but I yielded so far to the law of reflection in writing that I took on a string of crazy jobs with





the sole object of getting smeared not just by the environments themselves, but by my eavesdropping on the things people say... And I never ceased to be amazed at how, every weekend, in the deserted office of the brewery where on weekdays my father and his accountant would work, I could carry on jotting down the things that had befallen me in the course of a defamiliarising week and that I had dreamed up in the arcing of my mind... And I went on playing like this, with a sense of having my chest rubbed with goose fat by a beautiful girl, so strongly did I feel honoured and anointed by the act of writing... And then it dawned that my years of apprenticeship were over and that I must snip myself off from the brewery and abandon those four rooms and the little town where my time had begun standing still... and I moved to Libeň,⁶ to a single room in what had once been a smithy, and so embarked not only on a new life, but also on a different way of writing... And then I spent four years commuting to Kladno and the open-hearth furnaces of the Poldi iron and steel works and that gradually made a difference to the way I played with sentences... Lyricism became slowly regurgitated as total realism, which I barely even noticed because, working as I was next to fires and the milieu of the steelworks and the rugged steelworkers and the way they spoke, it all struck me as super-beautiful, as if I were working and living at the very heart of pictures by Hieronymus Bosch... And so, having snipped myself off from my past, the scissors actually stayed in my fingers after all and, back then, I began taking the scissors to what I'd written, applying the 'cutter' technique to the text as to

a film. Eman Frynta referred to my style as ‘Leica style’, saying that I captured reality at peak moments of people talking and then composed a text out of it all... And I recognised this as an expression of respect because, back then, I already had my readers and listeners because I, as they put it, I had the knack of reading without pathos... And so, back then, I went on writing with my scissors close at hand, and I would even write solely with a mind to reaching the moment when I could slice up the written text and piece it together into something that left me stunned, as a film might... And then I went to work as a packer of recycled paper and then as a stagehand and I invariably looked forward to my free time and the chance to write for myself and for my friends, and I would make *samizdats* of them so as actually to be a writer, a top sheet and four carbon copies. Then I became a proper writer; from the age of forty-eight on I published book after book, almost falling sick with each successive book, because I’d tell myself: now they’re publishing things that I’ve thought were only for me and my friends... But my readers ran into the hundreds of thousands and they read my things as they would the sports pages... And I wrote on and on, even training myself to think only through the typewriter, and my game now proceeded with a hint of melancholy; for weeks I would wait for the images to accumulate and then for the command to sit down at the typewriter and rattle off onto the pages all the things that by now were just scrambling to get out... and I wrote and kept receiving honours for my writing, although after each ceremony I felt like a nanny goat that’s just given

birth to a litter of kids... Now I can afford the luxury of writing *alla prima*, resorting to the scissors as little as possible, with my long text actually becoming an image of my inner self, rattled wholesale into the typewriter by my fingertips... Now that I'm old, I find I can genuinely afford the luxury of writing only what I feel like writing, and I observe *ex post* that I write and have been writing my long *premier mouvement* texts in time with my breathing, as if the moment I wave my green flag I start inhaling the images that are impelling me to write and then, through the typewriter, I exhale them at great length... and again I inhale my pop-up picture book and again exhale it by writing... So it's almost to the rhythm of my lungs and a blacksmith's bellows that I galvanise myself and calm myself rhythmically so the act of my writing works with the motion of a grand drama, like the workings of the four seasons... Only now am I becoming aware that writing has brought me to the realisation that only now have I pinpointed the essence of ludibronism, which is the essence of the philosophy of Ladislav Klíma... I believe that it's been only through the act of writing that, several times in my life to date, I have reached the point where I and a melancholy transcendence constitute a single entity, much as the two halves of Koh-i-Noor Waldes press studs click together, and I rejoice that, as there is less of me the more I write, so there is more of me, that I am then a permanent amateur whose prop is the one little word: *Amo*... and so love... I blithely consider even the suffering and those particular strokes of fate to be just a game, because the most beautiful thing about literature is that

actually no one *has* to write. So what suffering? It's all just one great masculine game, that eternal flaw in the diamond that Gabriel Marcel writes about... When I began to write it was just to teach myself how to write... But only now do I know, body and soul, what Lao Tse taught me: that the greatest thing is To Know How Not to Know.⁷ And what Nicholas of Cusa whispered to me about *docta ignorantia*...⁸ Now that through the act of writing I have achieved the acme of emptiness, I hope I shall be treated to some means by which finally to learn in my mother tongue, through the act of writing, things about myself, and about the world, that I don't yet know.



THOSE RAPTUROUS RIFLEMEN

A short story

*Searching some old wardrobes for something,
I came across my first attempt at prose,
possibly a novel that I've since given up
for lost. So just for interest's sake, here
it is for my friends...*

1/

Jan came out. The glazed door opened, the handle having been depressed. Twice did the laws of reflection and refraction meet the Stargazer half-way. Once at the opening, once at the closing of the glass surface. "What a gorgeous morning. Good day to ye, Morning! *Küss die Hand*, Sunshine! *Küss die* bare arse, more like!" As Jan strode along the pavement he tipped his hat back to the very top of his head, his hand dribbling the ticking of his watch into his right ear as it passed. He was also careful not to tread on the cracks between the kerb stones and repeated to himself: "What a gorgeous morning! Have you had breakfast? You haven't. Is the city breakfasting? It is. On what?... Wagons, cars, motorcycles and wicker baskets laden with fruit and veg..." And Jan Stargazer lost touch with himself. He walked past the wagons, cars and motorcycles and time and again waved his gaudy handkerchief, convinced that he was sailing through a lake-town paved in swirling H₂O, where the cars and wagons were boats bound hither and yon, their bellies filled with wares and sightseers. But Jan

wanted more than this; he wanted everyone who met him to recognise at once that Jan wasn't Jan, but a craft that had broken its moorings. He asked the first passer-by to moor him next to a sodium vapour lamp in the harbour. He leaned against a railing and asked an old man to wait by his clothes while he took a dip. And he dabbled his foot in imaginary water. The old man wiped his spectacles, then a second time, and still he could see neither clothes, nor waterway. When the waters of insanity had risen almost to his mouth, he bowed, withdrew out of range and, from desperation, bought himself a hat. This is why Jan Stargazer enjoyed transferring the coordinates of smile and confusion onto passers-by, knowing they would ask: 'Is the man mad, or what?' They'd smile, then forget. But one time they'd come along entirely alone, with only their footsteps for company. Along a paved road or a footpath. And suddenly, Where am I? In the third projection plane of dreaming. Lips move, a hand addresses the blue and is accountable not only for third persons, but for entire assemblies. And then, beneath the waters, a foldaway field altar opens out, and who's this leaning out of its gold frame? Jan Stargazer. And what's he doing? Waving to the car-boats and testing the temperature of non-existent water. Now the former fun-poker doffs his hat and bows: "Yet it's wonderful to dream aloud!"... But that's not what Jan wants. He's unhappy with dreaming. That's precisely why he's kissed imagination's hand farewell, so as to be rid of it. That's why he's bouncing up and down on an enormously long plank and can't touch the ground because what about the tens, hundreds, thousands at whose

floors the lift of intellect only pauses and why not let the regions we pass by come gushing out? But snap a gear lever at full speed, bounce on a plank without being able to touch the ground! It's wonderful, daredevil, but how such things can end... These were Jan Stargazer's thoughts as he passed from one shopfront to the next. He stopped, stepped up close to the glass and breathed on himself, sniffed at himself. He screwed up his eyes and checked to see how fetching it was. Then at once he started thinking up metaphors for eyes. A pair of minus signs; twin knife slashes in a fur coat. In line, not one above the other. But how about some accessories? A white stick and a metal sign with the legend: *Blind from birth*. Touch, hearing and nothing else. This was the very moment when Jan became like the young man who stands outside the fairground booth within whose depths lies a naked mermaid, and wonders whether he should or shouldn't. Though he knows in advance that he should enter. All it needs is to think quickly how to go blind. First, close the eyes. And in we go. The peelings that are his eyelids admit a pink light, and touch is also a useful device and the walls are warm. The voices to be heard, how different the sound they make, and the sense! And the images to be seen! Six hummingbirds, no two the same, embroidering an inscription on a curtain: *Just what do the blind see in heaven?* That would be a good heading for a cook book too, look you. Nothing better than to contrive a new world for oneself out of nothing but noise. But then along came something that had nothing to do with the game. "Permit me, sir, let me lead you..." "It's all right, thanks, I only live round the corner,

I'll make it..." "Sure it's all right, so I'll take you round the corner..." So what now? Jan was the old passive Jan again, weighing ninety-five kilos. Somewhere from a desk at the back of his conscience a little voice piped up: "What did I say, sir?" There was nothing for it but to hold out an arm and go. Ah, another's arm, and warm. I wonder who it is. He half-opened one eye and out of the corner saw a skull with thick, black hair. Not wearing a tie. The stargazer opened his eyes wide, turned and said: "Fritz!" But he immediately lowered his gaze before Fritz's, he wanted to say something, apologise, but those eyes. The earth, apples, elderberry, granite. He was embarrassed, and with his little eyes half-closed he watched the receding Fritz Milkin, his schoolmate, who was reciting as he went: "At the age of twenty-six..." shook his head, "who'd have thought, at twenty-six..." and putting a forefinger to his temple, Fritz Milkin repeated to himself: "Twenty-six and a constant repeater of stupidity..."

11/

Every day, the Milkins get up, have a quick wash and prepare all the day's meals. They pee out in the garden. Oh, how wonderful it is to empty one's bladder in the morning, that rapturous whistling sound. Then they kick-start their tandem and off they'd go. On a bicycle for two, Ferdinand by the bell, Josef at the back. They lean into bends, step on it on the level, brake going downhill, and ring the bell at pedestrian crossings. A twice-a-day journey. Once there, once back. Josef sits there and pedals, seeing neither wires nor handlebars, seeing nothing at all. He just pedals, using

the smells from shops, bends in the road and the stones on the roadway in town to determine his location here, in Europe, in the world. At the third turn of the pedals after the first bend you have to duck. It's the first low branches of some linden trees. Then comes the war memorial. An alphabetically arranged seating plan of the fallen and missing soldiers of the First World War. And whenever, meaning twice a day, the brothers ride past on their bicycle, they always get a whiff of simple graves. They ride into a cloud of reminiscences and their hearts join hands and dance off hippity-hop deep into the past only to pop back into the bodies of pedalling automata a moment later. They invariably catch the unkind salutation of passing shrapnel and tell themselves: 'Back then it would have taken just one little step and the plaque, the black marble plaque with space for just two more names, would have been filled.' But they don't complain. And they don't even say it to each other. They just think it. And not even that. They're like the bell that they ring as per the highway code, they laugh and are glad that the war memorial's safely behind them, that they're breathing blue air, that they're selling mineral water. That they are Ferdinand and Josef Milkin, deserters from the war memorial... By the booth with a cottage attached, where Ferdinand's son Fritz lives, they hop off by command like in the circus. They'd trot on a few metres and stop. Then Josef sits next to the nickel-plated pipe and takes maids', ladies' and pensioners' bottles from them and listens to the liquid steadily rising until the fizzing at the neck shrieks *done!* And then other flasks, company casks, flagons, whatever people bring

with them. First come, first served. Josef loves listening to the pensioners who so relish every burp as they jubilate in their infantile way: "My, that's some water! So good for the health!" And Josef nods, understanding why they cling to every litre of air that could prolong their life by one tenth of a second. Ferdinand, he tears off the receipts, and as the one in charge of the money box, alternates between 'Good bye', 'Cheerio', 'See you again', "By-ee" and savours the women's backsides, slurping on his saliva, because he's still only sixty and a widower. Whenever there's a pause, Ferdinand leaves his booth, takes a look round and says: "Yes, it's going to be a lovely day." And behind him the trickle of mineral water tinkles away and Josef cools his hand in it. "D'you remember, Ferdi, that time we were taking the post up on the funicular and had to chuck that St Bernard off 'cos it freaked out?... " Ferdinand is staring out over the hills somewhere in the direction of Tyrol... "And how I had to bop its owner one? I thought he were done for. What a crack it was! Thought I'd killed him. But then I still had both thumbs..." And he looks sadly at the fin that used to be his right hand, where there'd once been a thumb. Josef, his chin raised, says: "I should have knocked the fathead out at the bottom. But what's done is done. Like with that kitten..." And now comes the moment that Ferdinand's been anticipating for the entire last quarter of a century... when Josef will start cursing the kitten that cost him his sight and Ferdinand his thumb. For a long time he's had his speech ready, ready to say that if they hadn't gone to get the kitten, the shrapnel would have made the same mincemeat of them as

of their comrades, while they were only hit by fragments. He's had his speech ready to say that if they'd smoked even one extra cigarette, or even if they'd denied themselves that pleasure, everything would have been different. He'd tell him that that scrap of fur, or rather his love of all living creatures, had prevented the black plaque that they rode past twice a day from being engraved in its entirety in letters of gold and with a photo of Josef and Ferdinand Milkin... Now he's looking into the blind, cross-slashed face of his brother and sees that any exercise in oratory is pointless. Josef is stroking the flow of water with his fingers and smiling. "You know what, Ferdi? Let's go and buy ourselves a kitten, just like the one back then, you know, a tabby with a white bib, white socks and a little pink muzzle..." Ferdinand doesn't reply, blowing his nose instead. He can see a bunch of navvies coming from the railway. He glances at the calendar and thinks: "Aha, Friday! Hello!..." But no. Workers. On a Friday. Nothing to smoke. Proletarians from Thursday to Saturday. 'To hell with it!' 'Life's a pig!' 'Bugger it all!' 'We'll be beggars till the day we die, the bosses do what they like with us.' They'll have been raining abuse on the New European Order since first thing, banging their tools viciously. Now some sit on the table, others astride the bench in revolt, while from Monday to Thursday, when they still have something or other to smoke, they sit properly. Ferdinand taps his forehead: two missing, ah yes, they'll have gone into town to pick up dog-ends... and he sets glasses of mineral water down in front of the navvies. Suddenly the whole gang jumps up and stares hard towards the

corner of the square. “Got some?” ... “Got some!” the two tatterdemalions exult, raising their cupped palms high. And the rest dash towards them. They share out the dog-ends and in silent concentration re-roll them. And they start puffing away. They inhale the smoke and something nice shines out of their eyes, and they aren’t even listening to their comrade as he sketches, in the sand, on his knees, a map of his little field on which he’s marking an avenue of cherry trees as a line of dots. Through the billowing smoke the navvies draw inspiration from any woman who passed by. “What a roly-poly!...” “Hell, they must be feeling the heat... sweating...” “Between their legs!” And one old boy with a face full of jolly wrinkles exhales through the smoke: “The Tartar women used to shave it. We’d spy on them through a chink in the bathroom, single or married, wow...” And he half-closes his eyes and the others, Ferdinand as well, follow suit. “They give ’em a good soaping then shave ’em with a sharp knife.” And they can all envisage, at arm’s length, the Tartar women bathing, stropping their knife, propping their legs up on a bench and shaving themselves between the legs, or one another... “When we was in Algiers we ’ad a hell of a time with ’em, filthy bitches...,” a gaunt fellow takes over, “...filthy, I tell you, we always ’ad to give ’em a bath first, an’ if you’d seen the diseases, scary...” And again they all grimace at the image and reach for their flies. “Best know where you’re putting it...” “Let it loose on some Turkish bint...” “You could end up wi’ it drippin’ slivovitz, a whole Danube...” “Christ, we ’ave to go, or the supervisor’ll do his nut...” And one by one they pay their twenty hellers, for

Ferdinand lets them have it cheap, he really appreciates this bunch, who've taught him so much about Africa and Asia, whither two of them once wandered. Every day he asks them things, or they start of their own accord. And that's why they get a discount, likewise the retired pastry-cook Marvánek. Every time he turns up, he unbuttons his waistcoat and takes out a silver tube that looks like a chalice taken from a shrine. Then out comes a little funnel that he fits into the tube and then dribbles the mineral water into it. Kids and grown-ups alike come to sit and stare at Marvánek's silver tube. But now Ferdinand is staring after the departing navvies, mentally filling in the details of the tale he's been told and plucking hairs from his nose. Hell no! That man's back on his knees and drawing his little field again, this time in the gutter, marking with a cross the line of cherry trees planted for his daughter, and Ferdinand guesses that at that moment he's adding his neighbour's field to the diagram, and wingeing about the neighbour's unwillingness to sell him the strip that will make his cherry orchard whole and enable him to plant another row of trees. Ferdinand has heard it all a hundred times before and knows the sorry tale of woe by heart, and he understands. He sees the dreamer rub the pretty geometry out with his foot and his mates thumping the poor guy in the back. When Ferdinand turns round, he sees that his brother, his head on his chest, has fallen asleep.

III/

At that moment Jan Stargazer turns up, as is his wont. Head held high and hatless. Now and again he runs a comb

through his hair and watches, against the morning sunlight, his dead hair being borne away on the wind. "Good morning, Mr Milkin," he says, saluting with one finger, "Is Fritz in?" "Not sure, he could be still in bed..." says Ferdinand, offering Jan his hand. "What's up?" "Nothing in particular, I want to see Fritz," says Jan and he opens the little gate. He crosses the yard and knocks on the cottage door. Not a sign. Just some wasps hissing about under the overhang. He takes the door handle and stares gormlessly at his wrist watch. Quarter past ten. And in he goes. Once he gets used to the change of light, he looks about him. The pictures they'd been talking about were lying on the floor. Jan treads on the work, the face of a portrait of a girl, as it happens. He quickly steps back and finds himself standing in a bowl of apples. And under the flowers on the window ledge there's a little mat cut out of sunflowers. Jan Stargazer mutters to himself: "What *is* the man up to, turning himself into carpets and mats to go under plant pots?" Instead of a cloth, the table has a moonscape covering it, held in place with shingle nails. The moon itself is covered by a promotional ash-tray from the Olla company. Jan is most sorry for the girl nailed to the floor through her eyes and ankles. And for having trodden on her face. He wishes he could strip off and lie down next to her. Warm her with his own body and bring her to life. Instead, his eyes are drawn to the wall, where some pictures are hanging of which it is impossible to say that they are pictures. He looks at one face made up of bits of newspaper and fabric and finished off by hand to wear the expression of doleful workmen, sentimental whores

or kids waiting for a bit of coal to fall from a passing truck. There are workmen stepping out of a frame made of welded pipes, whores surfacing out of cleverly wired-up corks. And suddenly they're all gazing out at what Jan is wearing, the tie with which he expresses his own taste... And a beggar sitting at the foot of a wall under a bridge looks at Jan as if Jan is wearing nothing at all. A fist with galvanised veins leaps from one picture to bop Jan Stargazer on the nose. Goodness knows what might have happened if the door hadn't opened to admit the egg-shaped, curl-coated cranium of Fritz. He places a little packet on the table and unwraps a rectangular glass sign of the League Against Tuberculosis bearing the legend *Thank you for not smoking*. "Fritz!" Jan cries. But Fritz starts hammering a nail in above the mirror, whistling as he checks he's got it dead centre. And he hangs up the sign with its *Thank you for not smoking* inscription. Then he gleefully dances a few steps back, rolls a cigarette and strikes a match on the sandpaper belly of a worn-out old biddy. "So, what do you think?" Jan Stargazer claps a hand to his forehead: "Wow, Fritz!... That's brilliant! Something I've been dreaming of for ages. Nicking that sign from the patisserie. To give us a conscience. We know what we're supposed to do and we don't do it. But I do know..." And Fritz breaks into a dance. "So do I. We crap on all values from a great height. Thank you for not smoking. Thank you for not smoking. D'you fancy a roll-up? Thank you for not fornicating. For not stealing. Thank you for understanding man's basic needs. Eh?" And Fritz grins a toothy grin with all his gleaming-white teeth and strolls across the girl from

her fingers to her head. Suddenly he holds his gaze. “Well I never. Her lord and master has washed her face. Was he trying to bring her round?” And Jan has no idea what to say; he drops his own gaze. “Am I trampling on beauty? Eh? There was a time when I wanted to stir people’s emotions with Beauty, but people still live like beasts and still work till they drop and get bludgeoned for their trouble. And those places I’ve supplied pictures to? Where did my soul in inverted commas go? Big houses, the cars of subtropical beauties and gorgeous idle whores in bed. Yes, thank you for not smoking. The League Against Tuberculosis. The whole world can go blundering into war, but something as simple as a sitting room, kitchen and bathroom, no way. I’m done with it! Causing a stir, raising the alarm with a bop on the nose...” Fritz is shouting now and pointing to his latest pictures, while in desperation Jan Stargazer reaches under his armpit and sniffs his fingers. Then he mumbles: “But Fritz, I want to be rid of *my* self, too, I want to turn myself into a carpet, just like you, but there’s so much beauty that just escapes, escapes.” And Jan Stargazer kneels down and wipes the face of the portrait. Fritz hops across to him and yanks him away by the shoulder: “Life and art is reality, not a daydream, not going about the street like a blind man, but with the eyes open, idiot! And now beat it! And give me a whistle tonight.” Jan Stargazer struggles to his feet, calm restored, and offers Fritz his hand. “Thanks, Fritz, I needed that, I’ve been born...”

Then at that time in the evening when lovers come out and regret having only two hands and one mouth, Fritz and Jan Stargazer are sitting together. Like gravediggers out of *Hamlet*. Sitting in a graveyard and making jokes with the gravedigger and boiling a skull in a skillet. In wartime a gravedigger will, in exchange for ten cigarettes, steal a corpse, gravestone and all, so what's one skull from a ten-year-old grave. And a Czech table calls for a Czech skull, one that will raise in the beholder a full-toothy grin to match its own... "Every household should have bones on the table," Fritz cries. "To act as an exclamation mark!" And Jan is happy for that to be so, though he keeps turning his head away. It makes him feel sick each time he registers the water bubbling as it makes its way between the skull's teeth and around its cavities. The gravedigger is smoking and a bit on edge. "If anyone asks, then you just found it..." But Fritz waves that aside and says he's got nothing to worry about. He goes on talking. "Come and join us sometime, Stargazer, and listen to the navvies. They'll have cycled twenty kilometres to work. To do track-laying. For 450 crowns a month. If you touch their hands, it's like touching a three-dimensional map of some hills. And when they get back home, they have to go out to get grass. In the night. Not their own grass, but to steal some. And if there's a moon, then after midnight. And then up again at four. Can you be at all affected by a Rubens when there's this in the world? Pass me a cloth." Jan hands him a small rag and Fritz drains the steaming soup, then, using his handkerchief so as not to





burn his fingers, he takes the skull out. He sets it down on a greasy newspaper. Jan looks at the table and whispers to himself: "It's a skull, a skull, nothing but a skull, bone..." But in vain: like woodworm the spiral of a question mark comes winding out of the skull, climbing up and up, and the dot at the foot is a human skull. What Jan keeps trying to suppress just won't vanish from sight. He sees a house bombed out and laid bare, bath taps dripping on every floor, one floor up a picture, a wardrobe, a carpet ripped away. The boiled skull keeps grabbing at different things, things that are receding in seven-league court shoes, things that are not beautiful, but true. Inside the skull he can see the world all abuzz, a huge trug full of painted Easter eggs, revolving round the pins of his mother's hat. Somewhere at the back the skull's owner rises, sadly swinging both arms, nothing else, just sadly swinging his arms. But Jan Stargazer wants to see nothing of this. He wants what is. Or what's there is, and what's here isn't? He feels awkward again, and when he looks up he sees Fritz finishing a drawing. He rises and is blinded. Fritz wraps the skull in the newspaper, shakes hands with the gravedigger and they depart into the star-filled night. Beyond the cemetery wall they stop. Fritz hands Jan the parcel. "Mind you put the skull on your table. It might help you, good bye..." Fritz makes to leave, constantly trampling on his shadow. Jan calls after him: "Bye. See you. Look, Fritz, isn't this a beautiful wall?" Into the silence of the night Fritz replies: "Yeah, just the place to whip your cock out and pee all over it..."

V/

Next morning Jan Stargazer woke up knackered. If they'd put a virgin to bed with him, she'd have woken up still a virgin. He hopped out of bed and, as he dressed, gazed on the skull gleaming white on his bedside table. That day he had to do *something* of benefit to human society. He went out to the back and chopped some wood, brought some coal in and had meant to dig over the entire garden. Now he was digging and listening to his mother's ethico-medical tags coming out through the window, the tags she'd stickered all over her son, the low wall and the old pear tree stumps. "Mind you don't catch cold..." "Jan, oh Jan, what are your bronchial tubes going to say to that..." "Oh, woe is me, would that I'd never conceived you..." And Jan thought brutally: "Well, you shouldn't have held tight then." He also thought how wonderful it would be to bash his mother over the head with the spade and be left alone in the world. "Jan, oh Jan, by your father's memory, stop what you're doing and sit down, you're all hot and sweaty...", comes at him from this window or that. But Jan wanted to shout back something rude, but hadn't got the nerve for it yet. "She *is* my mother," he mused. He tossed the spade down and washed his face and hands in the water barrel. "Oh, my own dear, dear child," his own mother went on badgering her own flesh and blood as she came running out into the garden. At that point the gate opened and in walked Fritz. His curly hair glinted like steel swarf. He weighed the situation up in a trice and said: "Howdy, Stargazer! Get your clobber on, Bobby's waiting... Ah, a very good day to you,

Madame...” “And who’s waiting, Mr Milkin?” she enquired over her spectacles as if inspecting a beetle in a box. “Bobby, Ma’am, a sweet little strumpet with a beautiful behind!” And Jan Stargazer got the message: “That’s right, Mum, a little strumpet with a beautiful bottom. And what’s wrong with that?” And Fritz, chewing his nails repeated: “Yes, Ma’am, what’s wrong with that?” At which point, Mrs Stargazer, a justice’s widow, staggered as if, there in the garden, she were playing blind man’s buff. Jan was about to run across to her, but Fritz held him back. “Come, the umbilical cord that ties us to our parents has to be cut...” But she didn’t hear. She mounted the steps, whispering under her breath: “Bob-by bot-tom...,” until, as she closed the glazed garden door, she trapped the heady word *strumpet* half-way so all her maid heard was the condescending, barely appropriate little word *pet*.

VI/

It’s a wonderful day in a lifetime that brings the discovery of something new, something stupendous looming on the horizon, something with which we communicate solely by means of signs, but which we know is coming our way and solely for our benefit. Jan Stargazer had ceased to be a letter box for the receipt of sealed envelopes. He’d been promoted. Now he was a post office that stamped all the percepts to be sorted and delivered to the correct addresses. An express parcel is an express parcel, a letter a letter and a packet a packet. That afternoon he was sitting by the window and staring into the glass at himself. Unawed. By a half-open

window at that. A wasp flew up, clad in its striped jersey, and was crawling up his nose in the glass. Crawling about his hair. Another time he'd be sure he had a beetle on his brain, dashing about on its hot feet and vanishing amid the junk of his mind. And he would suffer from the notion all day long. This time he knew it was a wasp crawling over the glass and from his imagination he supplied the extra tiny footsteps of a golden spiderling. In short: he was beginning to split into two worlds like a strangled amoeba. His old longing to spew up his dreaming and clear-fell some space for his imagination had been cast out. He amazed himself with the observation that it sufficed to place a sheet of paper between himself and the wasp so as to create two worlds sufficient unto themselves, two worlds of equal beauty. One this side of the curtain, the other behind it. And through the window he watched the cyclists, the old women with packs of mown grass on their backs, the cars, in short reality running on the drive-belt of the road. He manoeuvred the wasp onto the paper, opened the window wide and – fly, fly away, you wingèd, stripy skittle, freedom is the most beautiful thing man can have, fly away, fly, you girl of the 1800s, tight-corseted at the waist, fly, wasp, I am free to decide whether to free you into the air or kill you without a pang of conscience. In the air you'll crash into nothing, in the mind you'll crash into nothing, Jan Stargazer, but life is full of sharp-cornered objects that can bring you down. At that point, without knocking, his mother entered, her white scarf sopping wet. For several hours, Jan had known that he'd have to hear out his blood-related flagellant: “Oh, son,

my son, what have you done to me...” Jan relented. “But, Mum, stop being silly, go back to the kitchen, I know...” But instead his mother started shrieking: “You know, but I don’t. This needs looking into! My son shall not consort with whores! Shame on you! Did your daddy go with whores? I ask you, did your daddy go with whores?” At which point Jan started to titter, suddenly he couldn’t care less what he said to this play-acting woman. He knew it was entirely up to him whether to go and see Bobby or not, just as, whatever happened to be on offer, if he wasn’t interested, he wasn’t interested. He wanted to leave her one last opening. Stepping up close to his mother, he said: “But Mum, silly old Mum, what are you thinking of?” But his mother carried on shrieking in her high-pitched voice: “I ask you, did your daddy go with whores? Who’d have thought it! When I was going out with your daddy...” “...we would visit your gran’s grave in the cemetery and prick our thumbs on a rose thorn and suck each other’s blood to seal our deep love,” Jan Stargazer picked up the thread, because he knew it by heart. And he severed his kinship forever. At that moment he detached himself from his mother, from that moment he would only see a woman, this woman who’d turned her isolation into theatre and so too into his prison. He saw his own isolation and the fact that henceforth he’d be surrounded in his house by objects, and he smiled and watched the screaming woman dispassionately. Even before that day he’d have gladly become a policeman, taken out his non-existent notebook and issued her with a fine for disturbing the peace. That might have made her laugh, and all would have been

well. Now, though, he'd entered a world of objects and saw in his mother only his landlady, concierge, cleaner... raising her eyes to false heavens. And as she ripped invisible rags to shreds, beside herself with rage, she shouted: "My son's not going to go with whores, he will not. No, he will not! Which brothel does that whore live at? I demand an answer!" And Jan, bowing courteously, said: "The Tunnel..."

VII/

"Ever since then, every time I see roofers, I get spots before my eyes and have to get off my chair..." The company all nodded, but their minds were on why they'd come. For the racking of the redcurrant wine, that beautiful, red, redcurrant wine that had been bubbling away for four weeks through the fermentation tube and feeding the imagination. That day it would all be drunk, bar two bottles to be set aside for Christmas. Meanwhile they were skinning a rabbit that the bandmaster, Vaňátko, had been rewarded with at a funeral, and keeping the fire going in the iron stove, and it was stifling hot. Josef and Ferdinand Milkin and the retired confectioner Marvánek with his silver tube were gazing at the top of the cupboard from which a ten-litre vessel would soon be taken down. "So let's get started..." Ferdinand climbed onto a chair. "God, my head's starting to spin just looking at it, and my fin's probably not up to this; I might break it... Fritz, Fritz," Ferdinand shouted into the green tendrils of the Virginia creeper. Fritz parted the green curtain, stood on a chair and got the ten-litre vessel down. "Here you are, and after you've drunk yourselves

stupid, give my son a call, he'll come and paint you and... Thank you for not smoking!" And Fritz patted his father on the shoulder, winked at him and nodded to give his father, uncle and the assembled company to know he didn't mind if they did. And he left. "Quick, out with the cork! A spoon!" Ferdinand sampled it and "Aaaaaah..." And the whole company, even blind Josef, beamed. "Josef, shut up shop, we're not selling mineral water today. Put a notice up: *Today's allocation exhausted.*" "To hell with mineral water! Turns my stomach just thinking about it," Marvánek bellowed and, unbuttoning his waistcoat, took his silver tube out as if wanting to fraternise with every available drop. "Glasses!" And that first swig, delicious, the knack of taking in sun and sugar and fermented juice with the tongue, the wine, the *fine drop o' wine* as the old 'uns grace it, the way they do with anything fit to drink. A rum isn't a rum but a *fine drop o' rum*, a kirsch a *fine drop o' kirsch*, and this wine was a *fine drop o' wine* and they gulped it greedily from their glasses or straight from the nozzle with their eager snouts. "Those were the days, eh, Josef, when we brewed us a fine drop o' grog and it caught fire on the hob, eh?..." "And then you went and puked in the tomatoes, eh, Ferdinand?..." "And you, me old pastry cook, you puked in the toilet and we had to pull the chain for you and you came back covered in droplets..." "And you, Beethoven, do you remember on the way back from Ostrava and you puked all over your crime disclosure certificate, and then knelt on it?" "Oh, happy days, such happy days, my friends," said Ferdinand, raising his glass against the sunlight. "And you, bandmaster, play

us a tune, but with your fiddle behind your back, like the time you played on top of that ceramic stove!” “And when the cops then carted you off like a roll of lino.” “Play, Beethoven, or I’ll pour this down your neck!” The bandmaster played and the company stamped their feet and shouted: “Bravo! Hosanna! But back then?” Ferdinand began protesting: “No, lads, it wasn’t my fault. It was that greengrocer’s bookkeeper, kept on about some fabulous recipe, he did, so I copied it out and then brewed it up. Well, folks! All I know is that we went outside and slap, bang, wallop! Like when you knock down a pensioner, and I was just lying there!” Marvánek transferred some wine to his stomach via his little funnel and cried: “I know, it was called the Royal and Imperial Regulator!” “Bollocks, Marvánek, you poured a nice drop o’ Nuncius¹ into your silver tube and you were more than happy with it: ‘That Wantoch, he might be a Jew, but he makes a good brew!’ you said. Then having puked all over your waistcoat, you started shouting: ‘What’s that Jewish sod brewed us now?’” And so the company chatted away, they ate the rabbit and even drank the bottles set aside for Christmas. As dusk fell, they loaded the almost sleeping confectioner Marvánek, along with his little tube that he was still holding his thumb over, into a wooden washtub, decorated it with strands of Virginia creeper, made garlands of it to go round their own soggy foreheads and carried Mr Marvánek home. They got his key out of his pocket, unlocked the door, found a cork in the spoon drawer and stoppered his silver tube with it. The bandmaster stayed on guard; he’d left his fiddle at the Milkins’, and the company

staggered off into the dark of evening. At the crossroads next to the mineral spring they shook hands and said their good-byes. The Milkins linked arms for support. At the gate they undid the lock and, Ferdinand having wheeled the tandem out, Josef said: "I say, Ferdi, d'you know what I've just remembered?" Ferdinand knew at once. "That kitten!" "Right, the kitten. We shouldn't have gone there. You know, it's really terrible when I can't see a thing." Then Ferdinand shouted in his brother's ear: "Closing time! Closing!" and he jangled the keys to drown everything out because that really was Everything. "We're closing up and then we're off," said Ferdinand, stumbling next to the second handle bars. And blind Josef swung himself up and they rode off. As they reached the lindens and the war memorial there was a glimmer of light amid the gloom and both Milkins looked up and saw a tabby kitten with a white bib and little white socks and a little pink muzzle, sitting by the war memorial and miaowing pitifully, just like that time a quarter of a century past outside their trench. And the closer they rode, the more pitifully the kitten miaowed until it suddenly dawned on Ferdinand that he was riding on the back saddle and blind Josef was in front, steering, with the expression of a bird that knows where it's going. He wanted to shout out, keep shouting, but some little gnome had taken a hooked pole to his lips and pulled the shutter down with a clatter. He'd barely ducked ahead of the linden branches and suddenly a massive wardrobe opened its mouth and clamped its jaws... A crunching of iron and bones. And silence. Alone the kitten hopped off the memorial and ran silently across

to the bus and the brothers crushed beneath it, licked their faces and curled up in a ball next to Josef, like that time five seconds before the explosion of shrapnel. Then two airy shades, clear in outline, crawled out from under the bus, dusted their clothes down and, holding hands, ran with an unbelievably velvety tread towards the war memorial and engraved on the blank, black marble two names to make up the numbers: Josef and Ferdinand Milkin.

VIII/

Huge tears rolled down Fritz's cheeks, and they were more like tears of helpless laughter. He was glad it was all over for his father and his uncle and he kept laughing and playing the dead men's favourite marches on the gramophone, so greeting death with jubilation and birth with tears. A few hours previously he and the neighbours had dressed the deceased in bright clothes and laid them in coffins. He had crossed his father's hands behind his head, the way he used to take his nap in the garden after a good lunch, and he laid his Uncle Josef with his palms clamped to his temples to conceal the deep gash from the mudguard. His relatives, who'd been there since first thing, found it offensive and prophesied bad things, and each time they knelt by the coffins to pray, they couldn't get a single prayer out. If the wound hadn't been oozing blood through his coat, you might have thought he was asleep... It's all that heathen's fault! And they shook their fists at Fritz through the glazed door. But the time of the funeral was approaching, so they got down on their knees and started wailing. "Oh, poor dear uncle of ours,

what have you done to us?” “Uncle, oh Uncle!” “Oh, Jesus of mine, holy Virgin Mary...” “Dear old Ferdi, my only true friend...” Thus did they wail, wailing across one another and, above all, across the blaring of the gramophone. But Fritz was smiling, pouring himself one glass of rum after another and munching open sandwiches, and whenever one of the relatives stood up from the coffin to take one, Fritz raised a finger and declared: “When the soul doth grieve, the stomach shall sleep...,” and put the sandwiches on top of the cupboard. Through the open garden door two male relatives could be seen trying on the dead men’s shoes. “I’ll have those, if you don’t mind, Ferdinand promised them to me.” “Oh, no, no, no, no, not true! Those are mine, they’re Uncle Josef’s and he promised I could have them!” And they were actually Fritz’s! He leapt up and snatched them back, hitting the relatives over the head. “Don’t play games with me!” And he was smiling again, knowing it was going to end badly. He knew things would hit a slippery slope and everything would come crashing down. That’s why he put one record after another on the gramophone, each one louder than the last in order to drown out the ever crazier things his relatives were saying. “And I’ll have these trousers, Josef liked me best.” “And I’ll take this duvet for my daughter, she’s getting married. What good is it here?” “No, that one’s mine.” “All right, but never darken our door again!” “Let go of those wellingtons, I saw them first!” “Oh, what a lovely vase! Mother *will* be pleased!” Now Fritz leapt to his feet and his eyes focussed on the white stick that he’d placed in Josef’s coffin. With a few leaps he flew into the room and

yelled: “Out! The lot of you, out!” And he grabbed the white stick from the coffin and lashed out left and right, aunt or not, uncle or not, he went furiously for his relatives, who fled, tripping over the wreaths of wax flowers. There could be no understanding reached with this world, just a sound, a very sound thrashing. Then in their flight someone tripped over the stand and Ferdinand fell out of his coffin, face down and with wood shavings showering over his back. But Fritz kept battering his relatives, even jumping over his dead father. And the relatives gathered outside the window, next to the pump, wiping the perspiration from their brows and exhibiting their bruises. The white stick broke in two. Fritz, his whole body trembling, held the two pieces together, then apart, like the vacillating pointers on a balance scale. An unknown hand slipped some blotting paper between his next thought and his acting on it, and he hesitated. He glanced in surprise at his father, seeing his father for the first time, seeing that he’d been his father and would never be his father again. He was about to drop to his knees when the undertakers arrived; they placed the coffin on the ground and rolled Ferdinand Milkin into it, but Ferdinand’s arms had become so springy that they had to bend them into the coffin by force. And then Jan Stargazer showed up, dressed in black and wearing an agonized smile. “Some funeral, eh?” Fritz came back to his senses. And the undertakers started nailing the coffin down. “Aren’t you even going to see your dad off?” Jan asked. “No..., let the dead bury the dead, come through to the kitchen...,” said Fritz, pale as a sheet. And the minute they were in the kitchen he put the gramophone

on. Jan Stargazer stared at the rucks in the carpet and his throat went dry.

IX/

Evening again, and probably after the funeral was over. Jan Stargazer and Fritz Milkin, somewhat the worse for wear, had left the house of mourning, gone across the square to the booth and through the yard to Fritz's den and studio, and now they were drinking again, in silence, one glass after another, each immersed in his own space. Fritz, with his head thrown back, was reliving his moment of weakness beside his father's coffin. He sensed that everything had been a forced lie, that for all his intellect, that useless adjunct, he'd made everything a lie, he sensed that he'd actually been quite fond of his father, loved him even, though without once talking about it, that he'd played the titan and deluded himself and his father and everyone else. Never again would the stream of mineral water gurgle at his side, and never again would his father's voice be heard thundering through the cottage. In a sweat he rose to his feet and for the first time he felt sad. He looked at Jan Stargazer and saw that, quite the opposite, Jan was all aglow, somehow revitalised, even though in that drunken state he could hardly sit. Fritz saw that Jan had been saved at the expense of his own loss, that Fritz's own world that had just collapsed had been accepted in full by Jan Stargazer. While he, Fritz, would be going on rudderless. Fritz sat down, laying his head on the table, and Jan stood up, wobbled, opened a cupboard instead of the door, but then did get out into the yard, overgrown with

Virginia creeper, finally to grasp the door handle of the little mineral water booth. He was thirsty. He turned the tap on, successfully aimed the neck of a bottle under it at the very first go and started gulping the water down. As he went to switch off the light he spotted a half-open drawer. He opened it and took out an old photo, all grimy and dog-eared. It was a photo of a boy with a dog on a lead. At the top it had written on it in pencil: *This is my little son and Bubík the dog when they were seven.* “But that’s Fritz!” Jan muttered to himself and put the light out, then he parted the jumble of Virginia creeper and staggered back into Fritz’s den. He collapsed into an easy chair and fell asleep. When he woke there was already a glimmer of light. Through the window he could see, across the yard, a light on in the little mineral water booth. Fritz wasn’t in the room. Jan slowly rose to his feet, fell, got back on his feet and lumbered outside, then, holding onto the wall for support, he made his way to the half-open door. By the light of the lamp this is what he saw: Fritz was lying sprawled across the pewter countertop, his left hand touching the running mineral water and his right hand clutching the childhood photo of him and the dog, and he was weeping silently. Jan Stargazer closed the door, opened the gate and went out into the square. Staggering as he went, he reached the lindens and the war memorial, where there was a large black patch on the tarmac. He stared dully ahead of him and then, as if having just come to his senses, he walked away at a brisk, military pace.



CAIN

An existentialist short story

I/

I went up to the ticket window and said to the girl: "One ticket." The cashier replied through the window: "Where to, sir?" She knew me as the station dispatcher, so she was mildly surprised. I thought for a moment and said: "I'll go to wherever the ticket your eye first lands on says." And the young lady, thinking this had the makings of a conversation, smiled: "What do you mean, first? I look at the tickets all day and every day." And she laughed and you could see her gold canine. "Right, miss, look me in the eye and like a fairground parrot, pull me out a ticket," and I rubbed my hands and thought I'd got the better of her. But she was cleverer than that. Without hesitating, she replied: "I can issue tickets in the dark. I'd end up giving you only the ticket I wanted you to have." She laughed again and swung impertinently on her chair. "Right then, seventh column, seventh row down going from right to left, like the Jews," I whispered with a quiver in my voice. Then I heard the ticket being punched in the date-stamping machine. The window had a light on and some ginger locks now leaned through it: "Bystrice by Benešov. That'll be six crowns fifty. You're looking a bit sad today, sir." I said: "Something like that," and turned away from those obliging eyes.

Then I was standing on that borderline when it might be said that it isn't night yet and it's still daytime, or when it might also be asserted that the day is over and evening

has come. On the platform, the station odd-job man was getting the luggage ready to go in the brake van. I mused: “So Bystřice by Benešov it is. A little town I’ve never been to, a hotel I’ve never slept in.” And I found it odd. The station odd-job man lit a lamp and I, having no lamp to light, sat on a bench and scuffed the decomposing leaves with the tip of my shoe. I scraped a layer to one side and spotted a scrap of paper. I bent down and by the light of a match read a snatch of the piano score to the hit ‘The springtime of my love is here’. When the match went out I repeated to myself: “How right, the springtime of my love is here.”

The train entered the station. I entered a compartment, unlit as the Protectorate¹ required, and without fuss set off on my journey. As I passed the dispatcher standing there on the platform, he waved his green lamp up and down three times, like a priest sprinkling a coffin. On this trip there was no one playing cards, and I was leaving on a quest for simple human happiness, to harmonise my life to my thoughts. I was sitting in my coat and because I had a degree in the history of law,² I was thinking about the Austrian law under which suicides had to be interred out of the way, with no fuss, or be passed to their relatives for quiet burial. And the order shall go out to whole companies of maggots to gnaw at my eyes, divisions will be sent to my intestines and lungs, and several armies will be charged with taking my bones by storm come what may. And all that quietly, out of the way. That’s what I was thinking about and I listened as the click-clack of the wheels slowed because the train was stopping. It stopped. A dark-haired woman and some big boxes

squeezed into the compartment. I wondered: “What on earth has the woman got there,” but I said: “Where are you travelling to, ma’am?” And she said: “Home, sir. I’m going home and taking empty fruit boxes with me. I have some orchards, you see. I pick the fruit in summer and deliver it in winter.” Woe or exhilaration in the voice, hard to tell in the dark. “And are you happy, ma’am?” I asked. “How could I not be. It’s what I enjoy. Up a ladder all day, picking the lovely fruit, and when it comes to putting them one at a time in a basket, that’s the best moment of all. I’ve been doing it for twenty years.” Her voice careworn, but exhilarated. “And have you ever fallen off?” “Goodness! Not so far. And I climb higher than even my husband dares. I set the ladder on branches and twigs and rummage about in the very tops of the trees. I’ve probably got a guardian angel,” she said with a chuckle. “And where are you going?” she asked in turn. “Me? I’m going for razors,” I clicked my tongue. “Two razors, one to go in my hand and one into a limewood plank.” “Razors? And going where to get them?” The woman’s voice betrayed regret that she’d broached the subject. I gripped the razors inside my pocket and said: “Bystřice by Benešov, dear lady.” “And why?” For no obvious reason I started to rant: “Ah, dear lady, I shall climb a tall ladder and for a full hour I shall stand there and wait. The branches and twigs shall make my body move. Then someone will shout and not shout, shoot and not shoot, but I shall fly, not downwards, but up.” That’s what I shouted, or what was actually shouting inside me, and I leapt to my feet. The woman’s voice, though you couldn’t tell if it was a woman’s,

a human voice, and you couldn't tell if it was human, said something unintelligible in reply. The dark-haired woman who so enjoyed fruit-picking, had fainted.

11/

Over the prostrate body I told myself I shouldn't have done that. I summoned the ticket inspector with a little light hanging at her breast and together we brought the orchard lady back from the dark. I rubbed her hands and the ticket lady poured a little coffee into her mouth. Finally she raised a hand to her eyebrows and breathed out. And I still had hold of her free, motionless hand, breathing into her fingers and begging her forgiveness. Then the ticket lady shone her lamp in my face and said: "Well, well, sir, what are you doing here?" And with her voice a little posy flew into the darkness of the compartment. A familiar voice, pleasing to the ear and capable of bringing back events both snowed-over and fresh. I was still holding the orchard lady's hand, but the sickness of the past had begun to gnaw at my brain, my heart. I reached my fingers towards the lamp and shaded it with the palm of my hand. The orchard lady was quietly groaning: "Good lord above, oh, good lord." And she tried to stand up. I helped her. She took her seat and straightened her scarf and the light of the lamp watched us. The train drove onto a deafening bridge and slowed. To a halt. I turned, crossed to the window and slid it down. I was swathed in fresh air as I gawped at the signal indicating Halt. The train whistled dolefully. Behind my ear the ticket lady said: "Nothing to cry over. It's probably because of the