

Why Do I Hate Myself

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(selected stories)

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I don't know exactly when and why our life took this turn. We never made any arrangements. Maybe there was some word about something similar when we discussed the events that made up our life. Maybe it snuck up on us, subconsciously, so to say.

One morning I stared a bit more carefully at the little notes my wife usually leaves on the table for my children. Words in bright colors, on bright paper, you just couldn't miss them.

The messages said something like, DRINK YOUR MILK or CHECK THE STOVE or WAIT FOR YOUR SISTER AND BE IN FRONT OF THE SCHOOL AT 4 P.M. or LOVE YOU, MOMMY.

They went along perfectly communicating through those little notes. The two of us didn't get along at all. I decided to give it try, just for the sake

of it; there had been no immense treasures left for us to tell each other.

I prepared a note which said HELLO, HOW ARE YOU? and made myself late for lunch on purpose. But I should've known that they wouldn't wait for me. I came up to the table and showed the note to my wife. She rolled her eyes and continued with her meal. Without a word. I then showed it to my children, not knowing what else to do. They immediately got up and went to their room and brought back little pieces of paper and crayons. My wife and I, puzzled, looked at each other, as if something new was about to begin, something that was completely impossible, but that offered at least some excitement. Then she suddenly took the papers from their hands and wrote on one of them: SIT DOWN AND EAT and I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ONE WORD FROM YOU. She showed it to each of them, then to me. THANK YOU, I wrote back.

I tried not to slurp. We all laughed without making a sound. HA HA! I wrote and showed it to

all of them. The note went around in a circle, dirty from food. All of them wrote HA HA on it!

I was stupid. I began something I'd have to take part in, even though it already started to look pathetic.

HOW WAS WORK? WHY WERE YOU LATE? my wife wrote.

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? a note came from one side.

SHUT UP AND MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, their mother wrote and shoved it to their faces. For a second, I wanted to reproach her for taking the game away from them. But then it occurred to me that I was the one who was using their little game in order to solve some invisible things.

LEAVE ME ALONE! I wrote.

We ate in silence. As usual.

It is important that, for now, things are taking their course. I'm certain that there will be a time when I will be able to write down everything what's on my mind.

It's Hard For Me To Say

Lost, it's a tough word, yet it is as soft as a crumb when I try to say how I felt. Nothing was going my way, even worse, everything was falling apart. I'd doubled over from my helplessness. I wasn't even able to cry, everything was somehow dry. To disappear would be a mistake too, for sure.

Everything got mixed up. My wife didn't even notice me, she happened to be somewhere else whenever I needed her. She'd pause and wonder when I tried to hug or kiss her, no desire she had for me. Friends became hunters for mistakes, and I couldn't count on my children anyway. I almost bought a dog, so low I fell. I was nowhere to be seen, I was just getting away. Running.

At that time, I liked going to the woods. I would picture myself as a cave dweller, sneaking and hunting. Actually, I picked some berries. It was sad.

The most ridiculous was my attempt to revive a relationship from my college days. We got together at a little café where back in the day we used to hang out and while our time away. She was beautiful, that woman. But she observed me somehow from a distance, there was pity in her eyes, as if she knew I needed instant help. Everything I said she contradicted. I told her I couldn't forget her and that I loved her. It sounded like a plea. I watched scorn flood over her face.

“You ruined twenty years of nice memories. Just like that,” she said.

She paid for her drink and left, maybe forever.

I didn't have the strength to start anything new. I was killing myself with alcohol.

But, two months later, it was spring already, we met again, at some exhibition opening. From a distance, smiling, she opened her mouth to say something to me, waving, but I just turned my head away and left her hang there as if in a pantomime. I conversed with other people, small-talked about

the paintings, said cheers to everyone, and mingled around the place constantly avoiding her. She was inside of me again. I still had some strength in me to battle the desires that were murdering me.

An hour later, I don't know how, we ended up pressed against each other at the back seat of a car taking a group of us to an after-party at someone's place, just outside the town. She tried to appear offended, I saw it in her effort make me invisible. She talked to people in a way that clearly showed she didn't know me.

When we arrived, someone remembered to introduce us. She offered her hand to me as if seeing me for the first time. I shook her hand and even said my name.

"Excuse me?" she asked, and I repeated my name, and then she told me hers.

We nodded and smiled at each other. Then we were left alone at each other's mercy.

"I haven't seen you in this company before, and

I see you know them all,” she said and looked at me with curiosity, like some unknown woman.

“Would you like me to get you a glass of whiskey? Or something else, whatever it is they have here?”

“With lots of ice, please.”

I made my way to the table and poured us two glasses of something else. Without ice. When I looked back, I saw that she’d moved away from the chaos and was now standing pressed against the wall. I smiled and offered her the glass.

“To our new acquaintance,” she said.

“And to seeing each other more often,” I said.

We clinked our glasses and downed our drinks. I shook a little, she didn’t. I liked it, so I poured us another one, this time the glasses were fuller.

“Can I ask what it is you do?” she inquired.

“Why do women always want to know about a man’s occupation?”

“Ah, all right, forget it,” she said.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Do I have to?”

I smiled and raised my glass up to her face. We toasted again. Our conversation continued at a safe distance and we slowly warmed up to our new game. I believed I was seducing her for the first time, that’s how she played.

It’d be an understatement to say that I drank and she kept up. We were not giving up on our little game of rescue and we enjoyed discovering things we already knew about each other. We had something in common after all. We were already a little drunk and we started leaning close to each other, we whispered and let our heated cheeks touch. We could care less about anyone around us.

We staggered around the house looking for a bathroom. We got in together. She pulled her panties down under her skirt, then lifted her skirt a little, and sat on the bowl. She glanced at me and spread her legs, so I could see the flow coming out of her bushy area. I came up to her, unzipped my

pants and wanted us to pee together. She made me some room, gave me some space to direct my arch, but still I wet her. We laughed.

“You should aim better when you’re peeing with a lady,” she said.

“Excuse me! We don’t know each other well enough to ask for your help,” I answered positioning myself in front of her face. I was so close I was almost touching her.

“You could ask,” she said, pecked my dick, and then pushed me away.

I don’t know whether her push was rough or whether, with my pants down, I was so unstable that I couldn’t take one step back. I fell and knocked my head against the door, nothing serious. I stayed there waiting for her to come. She approached me slowly, holding on to everything within her reach. She sat down on me and got rid of her panties. She almost ripped them off. Then she lifted her skirt high and spread her legs wide and I could see her white belly dangle as she crushed me.

Someone knocked at the bathroom door, begging us to open. We paid no attention until he threatened to break the door if we didn't answer. We couldn't think of what to say. However, the person wasn't serious. We went on with our business in peace until she threw up, first on me, then all over the bathroom, and then finally she managed to find the toilet bowl and put her arms around it. She was convulsing with her head in, and I ran to her rescue. I suppose I came too close or maybe it was the stench, or maybe something else, who could tell, anyway, I started to vomit on her hair, trying to find my space in the toilet bowl. We were puking our souls out and everything else that was wrong with us, we were laughing, convulsing, hugging, and throwing up again.

When we got up to our knees by the toilet bowl, I could see in the mist of my drunkenness, and perhaps she could too, a couple of exhausted warriors, who fought on the side of the enemy.

The Crocodile

What was the name of that village? Or it wasn't a village, just a house we saw from the road. Nicely set on a glade, lost in a white mist, with a thick grove of tall firs behind it; everything clean, beautiful, romantic, except that our car broke down. Like hell it broke down, we came up to a hill, climbed it, went back to the road, crash! and bang! And then you crank it, crank, but nothing happens. And now what? We get out, like, we'll take care of it. We pop the hood, an unknown world opens before us... We recognize the battery. But it works. We look at the engine, then at the house on the glade, we walk around the car, check the tires, everything's new, everything works. And then we crank the engine again. Nothing. Then we cuss a little, best thing we can do is leave it there, but we're not

movie stars. We gaze at the sky waiting for someone unknown.

Branko meddles with his cellphone. No signal, we're too deep in the valley. We open the hood again. A jumble of wires and hoses gives no hope. We look around. Even if someone stops, we don't know what to ask him. I suggest we walk up to the house, maybe someone's there. And then what? We'll ask them to call help, what else can we do.

We hurry down a narrow path toward the house. There's no fence or any other markings indicating where the property ends. The house looks like a nice spaceship that chose this untouched glade for its anchor. We notice this immediately. There are no farm buildings, no machines, no animals, not even a dog. But the windows are open, someone must live here. I knock on the door and smooth my hair down, maybe a little too much because Branko chuckles.

An old grandpa in white overalls opens the door. He's barely over one and a half meter tall,

with round glasses and supple eyes. He doesn't look surprised, he must have seen us coming up the path.

"Hello," we hurriedly say in one voice.

"Hello," he answers.

"We had a mishap up there on the road and the car doesn't want to start. We thought that maybe you had a phone and would be so kind as to let us call help..."

"What help?"

"Well, a towing service or a mechanic."

"I'm a mechanic," he says, jumping up.

"You?"

"Yes, me. What's wrong with that? Let's see what happened."

"We'll pay you..." I begin.

He arches his eyebrows and tilts his lips into something, who knows what.

"But first we need a little shot of brandy," he says and pushes the door wide open.

The two of us look at each other and shrug. He leads us into a spacious living room that more looks

like a winter garden. It's unexpectedly tasteful. The wall facing the valley is covered in glass. Ferns and some other plants with meaty leaves that I've never seen before are planted around a small pool of water. On a concrete deck next to the glass wall a crocodile is lying. It must be at least three meters long. It lies there in the position similar to those I've seen in the Animal Kingdom. I can't resist laughing at this kitsch. I look around in search of a stuffed parrot or some other beast. I wonder why most people tend to screw up something that might look nice.

"A nice beast you have there," I say, looking into his eyes, as if I don't need his help.

"Eh, he's been sick lately. Doesn't want to eat. Otherwise, you can't give him enough food."

"It can't be alive!" I say in disbelief.

"What do you think, that I'd have a dead one here? Of course, he's alive. But, he's not feeling well."

"And where did you get him?" Branko asks in

a warm, homely voice and the grandpa immediately turns to him.

“I brought him from Brazil a couple of years ago. He was still a baby.”

“But how... you’re not afraid that it’ll.... that it might hurt someone... you or someone else.”

“Him!” The grandpa gives a hearty laugh.

He sets three glasses on the table and pours the brandy. We keep the crocodile in sight.

“Cheers, fellas!” he says and abruptly downs his glass.

We down our glasses too and continue to gaze at the crocodile waiting for it to move.

“Poor thing, I’ll have to leave him at the zoo,” the old man goes on, looking at the crocodile sympathetically. “But well, let’s see what’s going on with your car.”

We followed him without a word. Under the staircase leading to the upper floor there was a small room in which he kept his tools. It wasn’t a car

mechanic's garage but more a storage room that you'd find at almost every home. He pulled out a black leather bag, completely worn out, stuffed some tools into it, all the while lifting his finger and talking to himself. When his story finished, he turned to us and waved us toward the exit as if we were chickens.

We went up the narrow path toward the car. We were behind him, he was leading the way with his head cocked up as if he were a woodpecker. He was swinging his bag like a leprechaun happily pacing down the meadow, whistling and enjoying life. Branko and I exchanged glances as we walked, wanted to say something sly, but we couldn't. We followed him with gratitude, as if he were our savior.

He looks at the car from all sides, as if he's never seen one before. Then he lowers his bag in front of the engine and goes to the side again. He opens the

door and sits behind the wheel. He places his hands on it and looks straight ahead, as if driving.

“Nice car,” he says seriously and purses his lips, and then examines the dashboard.

“Here’s where it opens,” Branko says and pulls the red lever hidden by the wheel.

“Aaah,” says the old man and nods. “Fine, fine!”

He gets out of the car and lifts the hood just enough to find the latch, pulls his hand inside and feels around with his eyes trained at the sky. No one from above offers him any help so Branko opens the hood and apologizes.

“No, nothing, that’s fine.”

He stands completely still over the engine for a moment, as if this is the first time he’s seen something like it. And then looks in our direction and frowns. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Doesn’t want to start!”

“I see!”

He trains his eyes at the engine again and says, "C'mon, give it a go, start the engine!"

Branko gets inside and turns the key. A sound of effort then impotence and then click, clack and that's it.

"Something's wrong with the wiring, must be," he says. "And for that, my dear fellas, I have no tools. And even if I had, there's too much electric stuff here."

"But you've said you're a mechanic," I try.

"A mechanic! Not an electrician! When I worked cars, the engines were engines. And look at this, you can't see the engine from all the wires. Is there an engine here?"

"Of course, there is," I say.

The old man leans forward as if looking for an engine.

"If there's an engine here then it should start if you push it," he says from under the hood. He lifts his head and looks at Branko. "C'mon, get in, turn

the key, put it in drive and go down towards the paddock. It goes downhill, it has to start.”

We look down, toward the glade, toward the beautiful spaceship and the crocodile that lies in it sick and refuses to eat. Then I look at the mechanic dressed in white. He stands straight, determined. It crosses my mind that there should be some green on his face and some strange antenna on his head. Then this could be real.

Still, we believed what he'd said. Each on our own end, the old man and I gave everything we had to push the car to the edge of the road. Branko came out, held the wheel with one hand and pushed at the doorframe with the other. For no reason, the story of the grandpa and the turnip came to my mind. The car leaped suddenly and started down the hill. Branko ran after it and we clasped our heads, both of us. We watched as he jumped into the car at the last second like a stuntman. A couple

of seconds later we heard the sound of the engine. He didn't stop, he circled the paddock up and down, left and right, drove around in circles and in the end climbed up to us, trust his hand through the window and shouted something, then went down again and drove figure eights, circled around the house, honked at someone, at the crocodile, and finally came back to the road. He stepped out of the car, went up to the old man, and offered him his hand.

“Nice work!” he said. “Real nice!”

The old man's mood brightened instantly. He looked at the car, approached it, rocked it, and kicked the tire. “All that wiring means nothing. An engine is always an engine, no matter what.”

He picked up his bag from the road and raised his hand goodbye. I wished I were a veterinarian and that I knew something about crocodiles.

For a while, we stood there and watched him swinging his black bag perhaps hiding some secret tools. We watched him and that odd house and felt sorry, so terribly sorry.

The Little House Ghost

Busbuskalai has appeared on the sink, trouble's about to begin. He's getting ready to ruin my day. It begins early, like this, at breakfast. He'll be so ruthless that he won't even wait for the children to leave for school. Let them see what their father is like. I decide to put an end to all the shit that's about to follow, so I get up abruptly from the table, jump at the sink, and hit him straight in his face. The dishes fly to all sides, he's stunned among the broken pieces. I wait to see if he's going to leave me alone.

“You're completely nuts! Why don't you get some help?” my wife screams hysterically.

I restrain myself from speaking. If it stays at this, if Busbuskalai retreats, everything will be all right. It will be just a sudden attack of morning discontent. I close my eyes and wait, my head

hanging over the sink. I see the children silently staring at me. I have to take it, I have to endure that they're looking at their father and thinking he's crazy. They don't have their Busbuskalais yet.

"What are you doing? What's this?" my wife asks and approaches me, she puts her hand on my shoulder, I feel her getting into my face. I open my eyes, see her anxious look, full of anger and concern. She puts her left arm around me and wants to kiss me, but at the corner of my eye I see Busbuskalai pursing his lips at mine. I bite him suddenly on the cheek and my wife screams. She gathers the children from the table and sends them to school. They hug in the hall and cry.

I wait. Soon everything gets quiet.

"Why do you do this to me?" I ask him. "Why can't you, like all other normal ghosts, just sit quietly and watch what's going on in the house?"

Busbuskalai buries his face in his hands and cries.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” he says.
“You’re the only one in this house who just can’t stand me.”

Eradication Of The Seed

Now I'm ten, I'm big and strong, I know how to do all kinds of things, especially in the hills, especially if I'm with Dino, my best friend. We have that special something, we have no interest in the gangs, we're building our fort above the road, we spend days dragging sheet metal and beams from the landfill, we're going to have a garden, plant some potatoes, we're going to hunt with bow and arrow. We also have cigarettes. The inside of the fort is covered with dry grass, we can lie on it and keep the whole bay in our sights, even when it rains. But we can't understand how Roko managed to sneak up on us, he just walked in and lay down on the grass with us. We can't just kick him out, he hasn't done anything to us, he simply walked in, lay down next to us and undid his fly. Now I'm gonna show you something, he said. We watched, mesmerized,

as the giant black member disappeared and appeared again in his fist, pressed in the corner we just watched and didn't know what to do. It suddenly squirted out and we got startled, not understanding how he'd done it. Disgusted, we watched the white saliva spill all over the grass and we immediately went out after him, but it was too late. We were alone again.

We're tearing down the fort now, bringing more rocks, branches, dirt, we want everything to be as it was, as if nothing has happened.

The Female Nothing

Lela swears better than the three of us and that's why we allow her to be with us. The plan is simple: under the old carob tree behind the school, we're building a fire before the school starts. Every fifteen minutes, one of us asks the teacher to allow us to go to the bathroom, then runs out and puts more branches in the fire. During recess, the coals are just about fine. Together we burry the potatoes and by next recess the lunch is ready. We compete against each other who's going to come up with the juiciest curse when the hot peals stick to our fingers and when our tongues get burned. We stake the fire again. We savor the moment and fart. We hear the bell. The three of us hastily pee on the fire. Lela squats down and smells the peculiar white smoke. Not good enough, guys. She lowers her panties and pulls her skirt up all the way to her neck so that she

can hold it in place with her chin, then positions herself over what's left of the fire, uses her hands to spread that nothing between her legs and releases a thick, long stream. In the cloud of smoke, she looks like a witch who's afraid of nothing. There's no choice, we recognize her power again.

Material Fatigue

Eh, how boring my life had suddenly become. I didn't know what to do with myself. It wasn't so bad as to kill myself, but there was no will for anything else either. I went to the hills with the intention of spending the night among the ruins of the old monastery. I hoped for nothing.

I collected some grass and lay on it, waiting for who knows what. The birds flew down to look at me. They sang. It was the beginning of summer. What else?

I wished to get into the chapel that was still whole. I picked the lock, I hadn't forgotten how to do that. Inside, everything was okay. I touched things and asked myself if God existed, if he saw me in this state and what he could do about it. I opened the chest in the corner and found the priest's dress, beautiful, with golden threads. I put it on,

together with that little cap, but I had nowhere to look myself in. I sat down under the altar and lit a cigarette. I didn't feel bad. Soon I dozed off.

Voices woke me up.

"Good morning," a young girl said.

"Good morning," I replied, even though I no longer believed in that.

"Good morning," two men said in unison.

"We didn't want to wake you up, so we waited," the girl said. "We didn't expect someone would come here before us. It's so nice of you."

"Thank you," I said.

I jumped to my feet, not knowing what to do in such a stupid situation, and they immediately begin to introduce themselves and say their names.

"If there is God, then he gave me the name of Don Ivan," I said.

They laughed.

"Don Ivan," the girl said again, "we've decided to build our tent here, so not to waste time to travel here every day."

“All right,” I said.

I didn't understand what it was about, but somehow I felt I had to be with them. I watched through the chapel door as they put up their tent back there in the corner, under the walls. When they unpacked their tools, I realized they were conservators. I removed the god's servant's robes in which I felt excellent and once again covered myself with despair. Inconspicuously I snuck out of the chapel and, for a few moments, hidden behind the wall, I eavesdropped on their conversation.

“A good man, this Don Ivan,” one of the male voices said.

“Fuck, he's handsome,” the girl said. “He mesmerized me, I could eat from his hand.”

“Who knows how this is going to end,” the male voice said and all of them giggled.

I took a peek. They were looking at the chapel door. It was too late to make a wish.

The Letter

I don't remember that letter. Still, I feel embarrassed as she jokingly tells the story about an episode from our childhood to the people around us. She laughs.

“You wrote that love letter as if I'd written it and mailed it to yourself, and then you read it to anyone you came across.”

“Impossible, I'd remember, it's an important thing.”

“Of course, back then it was important, I hated you as much as I could hate back then, I was desperate, and I wanted to kill myself because I couldn't prove to anyone that it wasn't true.”

“Did you love me?”

“Did I love you? Haven't you heard what I said? I was in love with someone else. You were just my

friend, and he wouldn't even look at me after all this happened."

"No, I really can't remember," I say.

"You forgot it on purpose," she tries to convince me.

"Impossible!" I say.

"I have no reason to make this up, especially now when my children are older than the two of us when this happened."

The people are taking her side and any attempt to distance myself from the story would only increase the conviction that I really did it. In their eyes, I can already see the image of myself as a desperate teenager using all kinds of tricks to win her over. Some of that character must still be in me. I easily become a prey.

Fortunately, the conversation moves on, everyone has something to say about themselves. The competition in recollection begins, they try to remember the stupid things they did back then and

what were the summers like. But there is a strong feeling that the letter is still on everyone's mind.

Later, when we're left alone, my wife installs some new expression of distrust on her face and asks if it truly was so.

"If it had been, would it have changed anything between us?" I answer.

"Don't be ridiculous, you know your charm doesn't work on me anymore. I just want to know when you began to use tricks to win someone over."

I lock the words deep inside of me and retreat into the comfort of my hopelessness. I smoke and sip my beer, train my eyes as far as I can, to the boats leaving the harbor. She knows I'm inaccessible now and in a different, reconciliatory voice she tells me she's leaving, today we're going to have our lunch at home.

"Don't be angry," she says and tries to kiss my cheek.

I turn my head away, but she still manages to

plant a kiss, she laughs and leaves. As if nothing has happened.

I'm left alone. At the small kiosk across the way I buy the letter and go back.

My dearest, that's how I begin. This letter most certainly cannot give back what I owe you, but it has to be written, just like the one you wrote so long ago pretending to be me. My attack from yesterday, I'm sure you'll understand, was just a need to hurt you in some way and to bring ease to the piling of all these impossible feelings for you, the feelings that from one summer to another entangle my thoughts with more and more ferocity and take me to the edge of my endurance. I fear that I could start something that would hurt those dearest to me and maybe take them away from me forever, and I'm sure it would bring unnecessary trouble to you too. That's why with this letter I'm going to try and explain the part of me that belongs to you. I also beg you that after this you do

nothing that would disturb the present good order of things.

If by some chance, after the odyssey I went through, I hadn't won over my present husband, my first love, if this hadn't happened, my feelings for you would most certainly forever remain hidden under his shadow. The contempt I showed toward you so clearly as I became a girl with experience, when in summer we got together to reorganize our loves and realize some of our winter ideas, when things happened so easily with everyone else but you, was the cause of my readiness to render any of your loves impossible, to push people away from you, to keep destroying you. Back then I thought it was the revenge for my first love which you had destroyed. I took pleasure in it and it would most likely still be going on, I would find a way to slowly destroy and bury you, I'm certain that in your effort to take control of different situations you would turn out even more ridiculous both to yourself and to others, I'm sure that I would keep crushing you until your final

breath, until the old people's home, until death, had it not been for the summer in which he was free and fragile. The great love began, with the delay of some ten years or so, but everyone acted as if they always knew it would end up like that. The great seducer just took his time to turn around and to forget, to get his fill, to come back and calm down. We have beautiful children and beautiful years behind us. You know that with love of such magnitude everything around us seems so tiny, including the doubts that sunk their pangs into me quickly. The realization that I lived for others slowly made its way into my consciousness. Suddenly, love was just a part of ideally fulfilled expectation, and it only came out of the desire to fill the void hanging in the air, back from the elementary school and the shame you brought on me. I often saw myself as a pathological case, as a piece of lead weight that could not get across the first obstacle. That's why I made life somewhere behind.

Reading all this must be strange for you, right? I could never say it to your face. Realizing you have

defined someone's life to this measure must be strange. It would be silly to say I love you, it would bring me back to the beginning, to the first fake letter. It's also difficult to imagine that there exists a more complete feeling of this kind, even though everything speaks in favor of it. You know that this can only be love that out of impossibility to become real used hatred as its finest weapon.

My dearest! I risk your unpredictability, and I beg you once more to gift this letter with a different destiny from the first one. I impatiently wait for tomorrow. I'll ask our postman to give you this letter when our friends come together for the morning coffee...

Without reading it again, I put the letter in the envelope, lick the edges, and press it against the table with my hand. Mimicking her handwriting, I write down my name on the front and put hers on the back of the letter. Then I order another beer and once again gaze at the distant boats leaving the harbor. Soon I'll look for the postman.

Pain Theory

That morning was no different from any other. I was changing my mind between suicide and a hearty breakfast to heroically start the day. The Slavonian ham rested on the sizzling onions for half a minute, four eggs with their googly orange eyes... that's worth living for.

A man thinks he's brave when his mouth is on fire.

My solitary room is small, untidy and cold. It's been like that for months, ever since my wife left me. Or I left her, who could tell. There wasn't much happiness there anyhow. Not even at the very beginning. Although there were many empty words on this and that, the shadow wouldn't leave. But we, the intellectuals, thought we were more important than the shadow. We thought we could do any-

thing and answer for it any which way we wanted. I guess that's what we kept from the '68.

I wasn't entirely sure where I would end the day, but I desperately wanted to go somewhere. I hung about the bus station, the stupidest place in town, and wondered, all sober, how disgusted I was with the bitter stench of vomit, engine oils and exhaust fumes. Shouldn't this place of the beginning and the end of the journey offer gentle scents and the lightning that fits innocence, impatience and passion of departing and arriving? But after a few hopeless beers I realized that every departure was mostly an attempt to abandon this hell of reality, and every arrival – entrance into it.

What the fuck have they put in my beer?

The train station is also not the place where I can be happy. At the entrance I load the discomfort on my back and, no matter how much I try to appear as if I know where I'm going, I can't shake the

feeling that all of those scared and tense faces get it that I'm just a loiterer. A cop would see that immediately. Where are you going? he'd ask. To fucking hell, I'd reply. And get my ass kicked on account of the truth.

That's why I limited myself here to just one beer.

Still, the dulllest stage of life is visiting bars and local gathering points and meeting people who pretend that they don't see me, that they're in a hurry, even though it's Saturday, that they're in a hurry, hurry not to see me and such. I watch gypsies and beggars as they sit on a cold concrete or a piece of cardboard, pressing their backs against the wall of cold buildings. Their faces are the faces of desperate men, the likes of which I could pull off in a second.

Around three in the afternoon I get tired of the question of why I keep living. I take the first tram and travel, travel, it's warm here. I imagine I'm

going somewhere. And so I ride to the last station and then back. When I remember the difference between Epicurus' and Democritus' philosophy of nature – I get out! And there, the life is born again.

It crosses my mind that it would be good to visit some secret meat market. A guy at the entrance who exchanges money for tokens looks at me as if I'm an idiot.

"There must be an early show," I say as I study the photos of naked broads behind his back.

He rolls his eyes, full of contempt. After so much watching, nothing is funny anymore. I walk into a booth and insert the coin. The veil lifts from the small voyeur window and I watch the meat twisting and touching its open wounds. I take out my cock and try to communicate from this side of the barricade. The guy walks in and asks what the fuck I'm doing.

"I knew you were sick the moment I saw you," he says.

“I didn’t know your old man opened this place for the healthy,” I reply jokingly.

The guy grabs my hair and I obediently crash out. Several healthy ones slip out of the hole and get after me.

For a moment, I hoped I could escape them. In front of me there was a street whose end I couldn’t see, intersected with many small alleys. I ran. Someone stuck his foot out of the hallway, a single foot in a black shoe, Devil knows how long it was, but it was enough that I tripped and fell on my face straight on the concrete. I barely managed to raise my head and all of them, almost all of them, were already around me. I brought my arms to my face to protect it, I knew they would kick me while I was on the ground. But nothing. The nothing lasted forever. I moved my arm a little and saw that the shoes were still standing around me. They weren’t moving, yet it was hard to believe they were amicable. Those weren’t good shoes. I should’ve

known that and remained in my position forever. What a fool, for a moment I hoped they wanted something else. I raised my head just as one of the feet went up and kicked my ear with all its might. One on one side, while on the other there was another one waiting for me. I could, well, experience an almost stereo performance of high-quality pain, it was so good that it was enough. Everything after that was pure profit, which, after all, they weren't ready to give up on.

Radazine Blues

I don't know why I got into it. Probably because of Nika. Rural tourism, ecology, clean air, bio-food, and all those nice things that come along with it cause disbelief with me. I don't want to say I'm against it, that's why I allowed myself to be talked into it.

Nika wanted Josip and Tamara to learn something about country living. She thought that they would have enough time for crowded beaches when things start getting out of our hands. I said that such vacation made no sense especially when we knew in advance that they would want something else... But no, she wanted them to feel this. "It'll leave a mark," she persuaded me. "Can't you see that all normal people are turning to nature and the land?"

"What do you mean?"

“Just that we have to look after our children when we can’t look after ourselves.”

“I can’t see what’s wrong with some small place on the coast.”

“You know very well what’s wrong with it,” she said, making it clear the discussion was over.

All right. Wanting to please her or to avoid a fight, I no longer remember which, I agreed without resistance. I dully imagined rural idyll, boredom and heat without a possibility to cool myself down in some pond, as all normal people do, even ecologists. But when my wife gets hooked onto something, she makes sure to see it all the way through, even if by force. This always seemed like a rather nasty quality in this world. But as I was already in...

This house of ours was pure perversion. We sat in the court under an old fig tree that had never received a shot of artificial fertilizer. At three hundred meters above sea level, in the center of the island, we ate lunch and watched the sea. The

torment of Tantalus could have been pure pleasure considering I just couldn't remember what I'd done wrong.

Nika truly made an effort to teach the children how to milk a goat and how to make cheese, in case they every decided to build a farm. She insisted that they watched Aunt Anka as she slaughtered a chicken and dipped it into hot water, plucked its feathers and gutted it, and, in general, she convinced them that there was no place for disgust towards all those things that took place in front of our eyes. I was somewhat surprised by their tireless running after domestic animals. What made me wonder the most was Josip who, at fourteen years of age, could have had some different needs.

Three or four days had passed and by then everyone knew everything. I was familiar with the smallest detail of every important event in the world. At the local store there was no crossword puzzle I hadn't solved or at least attempted to solve.

The village greeted me. At forty years old, for them I was just a snotty little boy.

And then one morning came, actually it was just before noon, when Uncle Šime showed up with a dead young billy in his arms and put it on the table.

“Motherfucking bastards, they’ve sprayed the grass with that poison again, rotten fucks.”

Tamara immediately burst into tears. Aunt Anka took her head into her hands and just kept repeating: “Oh my, oh my, what are we gonna do now... And look how nice it was, oh my little sunshine, not five kilos on it, pure milk on it, oh my little sunshine...”

“And what about the mother, I don’t know if we’ll manage to save her. She’s just lying there, not moving, but she’s breathing,” Uncle Šime said.

“Oh, mother of god, oh my, it’s best we all kill ourselves.”

“Not us,” Josip said protectively.

Nika glared at him and said, “Josip!”

“What? I’m not going to kill myself,” he said again, trying to take responsibility for himself only.

“Josip,” she snapped at him again and glanced at me.

“Josip!” I said quietly.

He lowered his head and went quiet. Nika gratefully glanced at me, like a queen.

The situation was grim. I didn’t know whether to withdraw or participate in this family tragedy. I most certainly couldn’t help the little billy, and Aunt Anka was devastated. Still, I felt some strange unease, something a culprit sometimes feels. Of course, it was ridiculous, the fact that I came from the city didn’t mean I was a murderer.

“Can anything of the goat be saved?” I blurted out.

Aunt Anka burst into tears again and sat down under the fig tree. Nika ran away into the house with the children, rolling her eyes towards the sky, as if asking God to be her husband.

But Uncle Šime immediately suggested we dig a hole in the olive orchard and bury the little beast.

“Who’d want to eat that, that bucket of poison,” he said.

I shoveled the dirt he had dug out. I was almost joyous, I don’t know what devil had gotten into me. Nika would surely accuse me of being a pervert, if I ever admitted to her that I truly felt the country life for the first time when we buried the billy. “Because it symbolizes the end of this vacation,” she’d say. But it wasn’t so. For a moment, it crossed my mind I could get used to this kind of living.

We’d dug a grave that was big enough for the billy, but then we remembered its mother and expanded the pit, just in case. We lowered the billy inside and Uncle Šime sprinkled a fistful of dirt on it. Those colorful African tribes came to my mind. Or is this our custom?

“Let it lie there until we see what’s going on with the mother. Nothing’s gonna happen to it,” he said.

All right. We took my Opel to the poisoned paddock. The grass was no different from any other grass, dry and yellow, yet I had a feeling my shoes could get poisoned too. We found the nanny, half-dead, lying in the sun, only its eyes were open, prepared to travel somewhere far, far away. The paramedics wouldn't have transferred it to the car with more care.

"It's done for," Uncle Šime said, "Take us straight to the olives."

Back at the olive orchard, we carried the nanny out of the car, he held the forelegs, while I held the rear legs, and put it next to the grave. I set its head into some imaginary natural position. We couldn't bury it while it was still alive.

"It has to hurt like hell," I said.

"Judging by the eyes, it probably doesn't."

"Do you think we could still save it, if we call the vet?"

We moved the nanny to the shade and Uncle Šime went home to make the call. Leaning against

the olive tree, I watched the goat and smoked. The flies had already started swarming around the grave. I went there and tried to chase them away with my hand. They soon overpowered me, so I decided to leave them in peace. I went back to the nanny and dared to stroke its head. I kept my hand on its neck and gazed into its eyes, just as I sometimes gaze into my wife's when she's falling asleep.

“Are you in pain?” I asked the nanny.

It gave out some dull sound, I don't know where it came from.

“There's hope,” Uncle Šime said behind my back.

We took the billy out of the grave, removed the dry soil from it, and put it in a black garbage bag.

“Let it stay in the freezer until the vet comes, then he can have a look at it too. You don't find it disgusting, do you?” Uncle Šime asked.

“Me? It's the same in the city, they put people in refrigerators there too.”

We concluded that it was perfectly fine.

“You’re out of your minds,” Aunt Anka yelled and I already felt like a part of the family. “Barbarians didn’t put their beasts into freezers, what’s wrong with you!”

“Aunt Anka, if the vet says the meat is not poisoned, you can eat it, and if it is, we’ll bury it again.”

“To eat that milk? You’re crazy!”

But the thing had already been done and now, like in some new life of the people who were brought close together by tragedy, we once again sat under the fig tree. After a few glasses of grappa, it crossed my mind that my grandfather had planted that very fig. I was thankful. Nika kept looking at me, but she couldn’t manage to get to me.

The nanny! God damn it! We ran back to the olive orchard. It was still lying in the shade, not moving, just as we had left it. Only its eyes looked a bit more alive, or so it seemed. We sat down on the grass next to the nanny and patted it together,

Uncle Šime and I. Once again, I felt the wave of emotions wash over me. I wished that the nanny stood up once again, not only to give milk. But it didn't happen. Our hands soon caressed the carcass.

The Fly

We put down the glass from which we've just drunk what was left of bevanda after an excellent summer lunch, let's make it grilled fish and lettuce, not missing to set a sigh of satisfaction free from deep inside our body, we glance at the sky or the sea, at the afternoon peace, and get ready for the horizontal. It can be a wooden bench just as it can be a couch which has to be in the summer kitchen, depending if the lunch was eaten in the court or in the cellar. So, we lie down, stretch out, always with the intention of keeping the siesta short, until the food settles and does its thing. We give free rein to our body with more affection than when we're lying down for the night, the lips, even with the poorest of the poor, give an expression of bliss and prosperity, besides, whoever managed to buy such happiness with money.

We close our eyes and sink into the sweet regions of half-sleep. It is waiting for that moment precisely. First we feel it on our bare arm, we flinch and gather the strength to get up again and chase it out or to kill it with the kitchen towel. There's nothing easier than killing a fly. No pity, as if we've destroyed boredom. We just wave our hand, chasing away the demons, the first attempt is still filled with the irrational hope that for some unknown reason today of all days it would stop pestering. We do not even open our eyes, we are firmly convinced that today will not be like yesterday. For a while, we truly enjoy the peace and quiet and we settle again in the blessed lands of half-sleep, we call up the images of the dream we would like to dream this afternoon, and just as we begin to get lost, it comes out of its secret hideout and takes a stroll along the most ticklish part of our body. It's not the nose or the mouth or anything on our head, because we would get up immediately, we would put an end to that rude, direct assault, no, it's

strategically unimportant point of our body, which allows us to have second thoughts. We wince again, but it's in vain. We haven't even put our arm or leg down and it's back here already, at the same spot. We let out a curse, but it's a feeble weapon, more like a preparation for our own defeat.

Now we've sat up on the couch, our eyes wide open, we're wide awake and angrier than ever. We would've conquered a much bigger enemy with ease. It is on the table, out of our reach, and it seems it's finally preoccupied with something else, a breadcrumb that's been left behind. We're certain it has found something to busy itself with and we lie down once again. It's back on us, we no longer know the reason. Determined, we get up, spitting out an even juicier curse, and begin the hunt. We pick the kitchen towel as the best weapon.

But where has it gone? Like a patient hunter, we stand quietly in the middle of the cellar, observing objects on which it could be, we turn on the x-ray, nothing. This time, the sigh we let out is

horribly different from the one at the end of our meal. We glance at the door and try to think who we could ask to lend us a piece of fishing net that should be placed at the door. Tomorrow at the latest. Or perhaps yesterday?

The Ship

At five o'clock it's already dark, there's no one at the quay yet. We put enough wood in the stove to last for two hours, then we put on our coat and go down a steep alley towards the sea. The sharp northerly pinches our cheeks, it's colder than at the North Pole. We pull up our collar and try to draw ourselves into the warmth. To get to the harbor we pick the alleys sheltered from the wind. A few are already there, they're leaning against the wall with their hands in their pockets. We pick our spot, someone uses the opportunity to state that this the worst winter for as long as they can remember and the rest join in to predict the consequences which are most certainly going to be devastating. But there's nothing to be done about it. Red lights suddenly appear behind the point and everything that has been said no longer matters. The kid runs up

to the dock, catches the rope, folds the line, and with a resolute twitch of his hand throws the wooden pear back on the deck. The ramp is lowered, the metal stairs too, and a few people of whom we more or less know why they travelled come out of the ship. There are some unknown faces too, they are the ones to remember, someone knows something about the man who's just disembarked, you know, my friend, that one's a university professor, one of the best known in the world, he came here to do some research about the soil, he says such soil, so rich in minerals, can't be found anywhere. It's all polluted, I talked with him at Frane's, that's where he sleeps and eats. He says we don't know what we've got. And what's it all worth when there's no one left on the island, the designated critic says, perhaps only to provoke the story. The one at the end, the one who praised the professor, steps up to defend the future. When the word about some things comes out, he says, people will come back, that much's clear. Mhm, sure, that'll be the day, I'd

leave this place too if only I could. Eh, you! What about the rest, then you don't ask.

The rest of us remain silent like traitors, we don't know whose side we are on and which one is better. The crowd and commotion around the ship settle and in a second the ship is just a forsaken specter at the dock, in full light, showing spite to the darkness and to the cold.

We leave in silence, some head home, some go to the bar where they will wait for those two miserable hours to pass and to have a good reason to leave. Because the fire mustn't go out.

The Donkey

This is the last year we keep it, we are the last in the village who haven't turned their barn into a rental, now every chance they get they reproach us and say we can't keep donkeys and tourists in the same court, but this is our court and let them say whatever they want. Good reasons to love and care for it are long gone, but since it's still here, we love and care for it as if it's our one and only – if it wouldn't be embarrassing, we'd also say – our one and only friend.

We get up before dawn, take it out of the barn and put the pack saddle on its back, we bought the saddle from a man from the island of Šolta some twenty years ago and it still looks like new, we take it out of our court, climb on its back at the first step, shout “Aca!” under our breath, and it heads along narrow alleys, its hoofs echoing in the narrow

space. Those who know wake up and simply turn to the other side, happy that this natural clock just warned them they still have enough time to sleep, those who have just arrived jump up and open their windows to check what unfamiliar noise disturbs the peace and quiet that has been given a special place in the tourist offer, we pay no heed to any of it, we wait until we reach the unpaved road at the exit from the village, when our real story will begin. We are in no hurry, we let it pause at the places most dear to it, we take pleasure in watching it eat, we get angry and swear when it takes too much time, for this is a journey after all.

There's nothing left to do in the vineyard, we tend to the stakes and check the vines for diseases, we gaze into the sky and the sun, and here we are, in the shade of the sorb tree, in front of our little hut, we make fire and grill pancetta, we eat and watch the donkey that's already had its fill, and the only thing it does now is chase away the flies with its tail. We get up to take some fresh water from

the cistern, we make bevanda and ask it if it's thirsty, it nods and there, my little one, I'll give you some too. We stroke its forehead as it drinks and feel sorry for it, we ask him questions and we know the answers, and then we go back and use the same bucket to take out some water for our own bevanda.

The return is noisy, the alleys are alive now and the tourists stop us, they wonder and take pictures, we put frightened children to sit on its back, we threaten the ones who want to beat it and check if it is true that it feels nothing. In the end, we have to fight to take it out of this battlefield in which everyone wants more, the two of us reach our gate, our court, where a different ceremony takes place, we're tired of everything and on top of that the neighbors give us dirty looks because it did its business at their door, and it's time for lunch. We remove the saddle and the sack of grass we picked in the field, we give it water and take it to its rental. We're going to pick up the dung later.

The Boat

First, it's a piece of wood or a well bent piece of can metal our father makes and we insist that it has a sail, and there, it has a sail and we push it off the beach together with other boats, it's a proper little fleet conquering lands that are further away than America and that, that... In the beginning, practicing love knows no rules or discipline, we teach the sea and the boat to become our best friends. Then gondola and youth come along, in a second, we become sailors and lovers and we can't tell what we're better at. The boat enters into us like a sharp razor and every wound in a second becomes just an invisible scar that gives confidence: that's when we learn the best and the most, we're not afraid of anything anymore, we're the best and no one is our match. The boat remains imprisoned in us or we in it, it doesn't matter how we're going to look at

it, because countless are the moments when we depended on each other and forced one another to yield, to get to our senses, to listen, at the verge of tragedy, in the middle of some horrible storm, or in a sudden surge of spite, when we needed to show the world, and ourselves, what the boat and the man can do when they become one.

Here we are at the quay, our cane is leaning against the stone bollard, someone will eventually toss it to us if this time we manage to jump into our boat, and if not, who cares, we don't have to disembark ever again, we say this to our son in front of everyone so that he can't do anything to us, and so that nothing can prevent us to live the way we want, even though we cannot. Our boat is our only sanctuary, the only thing that's completely ours and no one else's, the smartest among us understand this and they shout to let the man be, let him set sail, what could happen to him on a boat and in this weather at that, but the family suddenly has to show they care and it has to abruptly forget that

he spent more time in his life on the boat than in his bed or at his table. And why would he be better off with you now, go mind your own business and teach your own children, and let me be, we shout and swear just to show there's no joking about this. The man and the boat turn on and laugh together, they undo the knot and hoist the anchor, they let the bow rise up to the sky with all of its might, they do not look behind but up, towards the star no one else can see now, and if they're lucky, they'll never come back down to the land.

The Vineyard

All of this, if you didn't know, were vineyards once, we brag showing the thick pine forest, spreading our arms as if we want to embrace everything we see, we want to make it clear to that someone who we are addressing and who is here for the first time that we weren't born yesterday, and that this image lives in us even though we've never seen it. We guide him around this imagined island, we talk him into forgetting what his eyes present him with, for it is nothing compared to what we know and how we would like it to be, we answer his questions in such a way that there is nothing else for him to do but to wonder and envy, to feel sorry for the city and his inability to live a life such as this one. See, ten thousand people used to live here, their wine was drunk by emperors in Vienna, and their goat cheese was a delicacy at many courts in Europe, not

to mention other things. This village where now no one lives used to be a center where people came to dance and have fun, because good life does not take seriousness, there was a lot of work, but there was even more pleasure. We watch as wishes take place of his questions, we lead him on and show him our vineyard that stands like an oasis surrounded by macchia, we leave him to take pleasure in that part of memory we have turned into reality, well, not everything is an illusion and the past, crying and giving up. We walk around the vines, we allow him to touch the leaves and teach him how to recognize different varieties, we warn him that he has just trampled over food, we pick herbs in front of his very eyes and assure him that this can be turned into an excellent lunch. The determined step that the concrete has taught him now means nothing, he follows us so we are certain he understands.

We sit in the dark hut in the field and drink wine, we wait for the bitter cabbage to get cooked

over the fire, we fill the space with sighs and wishes
and when our eyes get filled with tears from smoke,
when no more of this life can fit into our lungs, we
walk outside and once again observe the vineyard.

Can you tell me, roughly, he finally dares to ask,
how much would one such vineyard cost?

We don't look at him. Roughly? Not a lot, just
one whole life.

The Farm Hand

We've made the fire under the pile, we sit and watch our vineyard and what's around it, we watch that soil that we've turned around who knows how many times and that can already talk to us, we remember when it was angry because we didn't look after it and care for it the way it wanted and that's why it gave us nothing, and when we were on the best terms, when we jumped around with joy and showed it to everyone, and we almost kissed it, because there was nothing we loved more. Now when there's not much we can do with our life, when we can spend the whole day sitting in the sun and doing nothing, we bring back the images from that time when we could turn the world around and believe in whatever we chose to believe. We did everything to make our children and grandchildren forget what we'd created and what we'd lived

off, now we're having a hard time because we have no right to feel sorry for the land because it stays alone, it seems we were unjust when we showed that this love of ours was not worth anything. Before it's time we do the final calculation and like some top notch mathematician we try to push into it the qualities that cannot be expressed in numbers, how many happy moments there were, how many instances of anger and weakness, how many helpless situations and hatred, and how many times it felt we would not want to change this life for anything in the world, we erase the time when we wanted to leave the island, but suddenly it is a number that's easy to remember and that keeps standing somewhere on the side, we don't know what to do with it, just like we don't know what to do with all the reasons we used in order to show that here there is no life. We're scared to draw the line and tally up the score that would clearly show we lived like prisoners who didn't know how to reach the mainland, because it would mean that there was never

anything on this island, and even if there was something, we tried really hard to stomp every trace of it.

We watch the land and it seems to us we lived in vain.

The Sheep

We start our boat's engine in anger, our children are with us and they are quiet, we're worked up and we blow out so much steam that the oil under the bow could catch fire, we set course for that little islet of ours that has always been ours, especially now when we have to defend it and prove that it was something more than just ours, that we lived from it and stayed here, even though it no longer gives us that something that is the reason why they want to take it from us, but it gives us that something that we cannot explain to any of them, and everyone understands it very well and they play stupid and as if they've fallen from the sky, they offer us a fortune which we don't know what we would do with, in exchange for the sheep whose lineage we know better than we know our own roots, and the two or three of them that are still

here are even dearer to us because there's not many of us left either. We drop the anchor, tie the boat against the rock on which we built a jetty, we jump around our island, calling the sheep, we promise them no one will move them from here until we breathe, we ask our children to make the same promise and with the same passion, we stand in the middle of that islet and don't know where to even begin to measure this dot in the ocean that has been a whole continent until now, we reproach ourselves because we failed to register this property, for which we and ours always cared for, because no one ever asked us to register it, and all of those who needed to know, knew it by the law that now suddenly is not valid anymore, because those who abided by it lie buried under our feet and their testimony no longer counts. We are angry because we cannot understand anyone who wants to have two places in one life.

My Relative

The sun broke through on the wrong side and from the darkness another darkness steals, at the moment when I reach after a glass of water on the mantel to pour over the fire, the door to my room opens and my father enters on the prow of his wooden boat smelling of fish and cigarettes, he gets stuck a little at the doorway, but his crew, in two strong pulls of their oars, leaves the past behind like some feeble joke, here the catch is good, he says, and they all cast the net together, disappear under the bed, as if they never existed because my grandfather opens the window and with his finger points at the vineyards that couldn't stay in him, angry of injustice, because if there had been two of them, they would've been everything and would've had everything, but why does always someone have to let you down, he asks, I have no strength to under-

stand, I just keep looking at the door where my older brother stands in his white American suit with a red rose in the buttonhole and suddenly all this doesn't seem tacky, finally, he says, finally, and it seems he's about to say something else but his best friend with whom he escaped from life, slams him on the back and knocks out all of the sentences he's been embellishing and hiding for all those years, now he only tumbles them in his hands and watches in wonder as they tangle up into an unintelligible bowl that will get stuck in his throat again, it doesn't matter, I would've teased him on some different occasion, you'll cock your head a bit, look more dignified and different from anything alive, but now move, can't you see you're taking up someone's seat on the ferry that just has to sound its horn and that's it, it's impolite to ask who else was inside, mother sees everything, and later she pulls up my blanket because the white sea spume merged with the lace on the duvet and what would people say, ah, everything's going to be fine,

it's just, it's just that that crazy relative of mine entered, the one who always had something good to say, I don't know, actually, why we felt sorry for him, and suddenly I came to life, as if he made light-light from this darkened light, and he shouldn't have, because all hands started searching for places on their souls where they could cross themselves nine times when they say, mother of God, a small coffin sticking under his jacket, all of us could fit in and we all know it, but in his hand he has an island, almost exactly the same as the one standing in the lobby of our City Hall, green, we all know that it's a lie, especially in the summer, but it's okay, at least the peaks I haven't had time to climb are properly marked, but why feel sorry, the ferry came back and we are all staring at the captain as if he's some miracle stealing the island from our relative, he releases the handbrake and without any effort parks it between the trucks and the whole room seems to twist a little, I could swear that was an earthquake or perhaps a wave which

the pilot split in half out of pure spite, and I didn't even manage to laugh in my cynicism when I saw that pathetic sentimental scene of people in black staring at the open sea with their hands crossed as if from there it will come and as if it is there and as if it exists or has it ever existed there, uh, I'd rather I don't exist, but don't worry, says my relative, laughing, we're all dead anyhow, we've always been that way, we're just waiting to get buried, and my aunt who has never married, ah, she says, nonsense, but somehow gently, gently she takes him by the arm and drags him out of the room, blessed is her husband whom she never had, because she knows to close the door and lock the silence in so that you've got nothing left, only that darkness and that light no one alive can separate.

Old Men And The Sea

Leaning against the wall of our co-op to which we've long since stopped bringing anything, but it still shelters us from the Bura or the Sun, we make up things and try to remember the people we could say something about, we try to understand why this fella comes here only in the summer and then acts as if all of this belongs to him, and he left us and our little rock when we were the closest we would ever be, or that guy who couldn't find some other time to take his family to the terra firma but has to do it right now when the apartments need to be rented, and how will he, by God, survive the winter. We agree that summers are getting shorter and worse and we agree that we can't tell if that's for better or for worse, because people might go back to some long forgotten traditions which they

would enjoy and then they wouldn't have to paralyze their lips into a smile for tourists who don't know what to do with themselves, and this way it seems that at least someone likes them.

A huge cruiser lodged itself into the place where our ferry usually lands, a staircase came down and now ten young and strong men line up along the staircase and help bring down three hundred of the old and the helpless to take a stroll along our quay, now when their lives are almost over, to see what they have missed. In groups they follow their hostess' huge red number while to us it seems we're witnessing a relay race, a horribly slow relay race, in which the knowledge of our culture is passed on. We're most interested in unusual canes made of material and of shape we've never seen or even imagined existed, we envy them, before it's our time, on those aids, we see that it's never late to become a tourist and we imagine that one day maybe we too could do it, when we grow old...

Look what they're sending us, says the voice

from somewhere on the side, it's as if we're a nursing home.

Maybe it's for the better, says another one leaning with both arms against a wooden cane, this way it seems we're not the only ones who have grown old.

Eh, but they won't leave one penny to our people, says the first one again.

Ah, come on, all you think about is money, open your eyes, can't you see that this is the first time this summer that the quay is finally filled with people, true, it's not all youth and joy, but it's better than nothing.

We've had enough of everything and so without a word we decide to leave, we wave at them and go back home. In the yard we hear our wife and children breaking their tongues and talking to some English people who stand on the side, at the entrance, and shoot them with their camera, they're making a film, they say, about a traditional island family. They turn their camera toward us and ask

us to do exactly what they tell us because, they say, they've already made the script, so we don't have to do anything.

And what kind of a script this is and what kind of a film this is, for whom, we ask. For us, for the English, they say, so they can see what life is and what they are missing, and for you, so you can see what needs to be cherished.

We don't believe this is happening, we yell at our wife and ask how they got in, why she let them in, and she defends herself and spreads her arms, well, they had the script, they showed it to me, I had to let them in. Crazy woman, we scream, those soap operas have gone to your head, what were you thinking, that you'll become an actress, imagine that, you can see from an airplane that they'll show us like beasts in Africa, and later they'll organize a safari and brag back home that they saw us and took a picture.

That's good because then we'll know we exist, says that elderly friend of ours who thinks only

about making a show out of everything and who, if he weren't bigger than us, we'd give a good slap behind the ear, so he could see what it means to exist.

Let's go, get lost, find yourselves someone else's court and some other jerks to play by that script of yours, we grab them by the hands and lead them out, into the sun, they can go to the quay if they want, now it's full of life.

We close ourselves in the kitchen, lie on a couch, arms under our head, and watch the rays of light dancing on the ceiling, which now remind us of a broken TV set. We remember when they were the afternoon's delight and when they used to bring peace. But then we had no apartments to rent, we didn't know what waiting was, and we knew how to answer the question of who we were. We had our own script and we could welcome and fit into it anyone we wanted. It must be that we've grown old.

We take our father's wooden cane that stands

by the couch and serves us to get up when we get a backache, we parade with it first around the house, then around the quay, which is empty again, showing everyone that we have the last word and that we are the only ones who have the right to die here.

The Concession

A million friends have visited us this summer, they've remembered that we existed and that they needed to drop by because they love us and they know we'll be happy to see them even if just once a year and always in August and they also know that we'll find a hole in this endless time that we have at our disposal and that is horribly slow and different from theirs, they never stop admiring us and patting us on the shoulder and there's no other option, we invent time all over again and we want to spend the afternoon on the rock in front of our port where we, when all is said and done, spent the best years of our life and where we took everyone we ever loved or met. That rock was our town's trademark and a point of salvation every time we didn't know what to show someone, we travelled to it for some ten minutes on our boat, which we

coaxed from our father by our good behavior or promises, and, there you go, our childhood and youth come back to us and froth around the mouth, for why wouldn't we, like in the old days, tie our boat on that old Austro-Hungarian jetty, climb all the way to the lighthouse, lie a bit on the terrace and secretly eye the exact spot where we kissed the girl for the first time and she opened her mouth and no word needed to get out.

This time our wife packs stuffed peppers into a wicker basket, they're still hot and we won't have to warm them up, we're happy that we'll go about this speedy lunch in nature, we already know which stone we'll choose for our table, and our friends who have suddenly disappeared know this too and now they explain to their children that once they too were children and had friends who had a boat with which they experienced real adventures so the ones they experience every summer when they rent a sailboat are nothing in comparison, the children watch them with suspicion and ask how there could

be something on that little rock they must have passed a hundred times and never stopped because they never saw anything but a lighthouse and some yellow grass? You'll see, their parents say with certainty that requires no explanation, after this trip you'll see things differently and although nothing is the way it used to be, we are certain that at least this one thing in our different lives will become our mutual experience.

The children roll their eyes, now we're at the town's quay, we can see that they are still deciding whether to set off on yet another boring adventure with their parents who in their hands carry buckets of wine which they will not want to share or whether they should remain in the safety of their air-conditioned room and using their secret, neon connections chat a little with their best friend from Australia, who have passed on their winter vacation with their parents for similar reasons, but here it is summer and the adventure sounds tempting if nothing to determine whether the story is true or not.

Making our way on our boat through the thicket of sailboats and mega yachts, we look like some poor survivors who have just managed to save their lives and are now going somewhere to celebrate, we wave at everyone and everyone waves back at us, they wonder how is it possible to fit so much laughter into such a tiny boat, they frown and size their own boats, they disappear in the insignificant distance, and we're at the gates of our paradise, our friends are on the bow, ready to throw the rope to the man who's already at the jetty waving at us, we're happy that we're not alone and that there's someone else who hasn't forgotten the island. Our friend tosses the rope on the jetty and turns toward us, but behind his back, we can see it clearly, the man from the jetty picks up the rope and throws it back on the boat, we're watching him with our mouths open and before we're ready to fire a cannonade of all the curses we know and don't know, in our ears it echoes: PRIVATE, PRIVATE!

Private, how come, it's not like the island belongs to your father, we shout at him, but the answer comes back at us: *I not understand, this a private island, we have a concession!*

Now we're on the bow, handing him the rope, listen buddy, wait a second, tie us up so we can talk, by god, we're not here to steal your concession, we just want to eat our peppers and remember our childhood and youth, and show our children what life is, but he waves his hand and gives us back the rope, sorry, he says, concession, private. We stare directly into his eyes. He looks back at us, you can tell he won't budge.

We head back to the town, sailing straight, he who doesn't want to be run down should move. We tie our boat to our dock, hide the peppers and the wine under the bow and take our children to a pizza place, that's all we can offer them now. Let them tell that to their Internet friends from Australia. Maybe they'll even invite them over, so they

can see for themselves there's no better pizza in the whole world.

We keep silent and respond to nothing, we see nothing and know nothing. The question is whether we exist.

Good Morning, Mr. President

How was it, you ask, what a question, I told the story a hundred times over and you still don't believe me, sometimes I wonder where I live and who I meet every day, it would've been a hundred times better if I'd, when that happened, packed my things up and left for America, it would've been a hundred times better than spending my life here among the morons who believe the papers and people they don't know and make fun of those they do know, eh no, who do you think you are, now I'm going to repeat everything word for word, so you can imagine that morning and the sunrise you missed, oh, I could've lit my cigarette in the sunlight at the moment when it surfaced from the sea, if only my hands were not wet from the fish and the net that was already in the boat, and as you know, the catch wasn't something you could brag

about, if we hadn't eaten fish the day before and the day before that, it would've made just enough for us, but this way, that yacht came as a godsend and if that guy hadn't appeared on the bow in his white bathrobe, we would've left the fish in the boat and then let them wonder what good fairy had brought it to them, but when I saw the man on the bow whose stature I knew from somewhere but I still didn't know who he was, I couldn't even dream that Bill Clinton in person, he personally, would greet me and get into my boat, and you know what kind of a boat this is, you need to take a good shower when you leave, eh, but that he would come to that very boat and my very cove to grill two mackerels for breakfast, and I wasn't even sure if the President of America ate mackerel, I would've given everything in the world for a fresh grouper or a toothfish, but no, he said he'd never eaten anything tastier or better, and he ate all over the world things we don't even know exist, I thought he was jerking me around, but then again a man can't be

telling a lie when he's licking his finger and shaking his head in front of you as if he's in paradise, and I couldn't but ask how come he'd chosen our little inlet and how come he was on vacation, and he unraveled the whole story in front of me as if reading it from a book, everything to the smallest detail, from how they'd planned the escape from the White House for days, how they'd loosened the bars on the toilet window so that they could take them down in a second, then down the rope to the street, then the driver waiting and taking them to the helipad, then a transfer to New York City, then the fake passport and the plane to Frankfurt, then Zagreb, then Split, then a special speedboat to this god-forsaken cove which they'd chosen randomly, just closing their eyes and sticking their pencil into the Adriatic and right in the middle of it, they almost broke the globe, and that was it, that was supposed to be a secret vacation no one could know about, because for five years he'd been living day and night for America, and the Desert Storm had

taken the best of him, you wouldn't believe how much trouble it was, one sickening game of chess without an end, but we'll talk about it some other time, and now thank you very much and it's been as good as it gets and how much we owe you, and hahaha, owe me, and how much we owe you, I ask, you are the President of America, not me, well, then, if that's the case he'll settle this differently, there, tomorrow morning, a friendly cup of coffee at the hotel, at eight o'clock sharp, a friendly cup of coffee to start a day and then we'll see what happens, it smelled of a nice friendship, and so, the next day, at eight in the morning, by God, it was the longest night of my life, to have a cup of coffee with the President of America and not to tell anyone, who would've believed me anyhow, I can see it in your faces now, there's no oath I could give or imagine to make you believe me, but that's not important, it's important that we met and that we didn't even have that coffee because two men in

black with black sunglasses appeared out of nowhere and took him under his arm and hop!, into the speedboat and off they went, so I was terribly sorry and I thought that it was all my fault because I agreed to meet him in the civilized world, just so someone could see me with him, and look at it now, what a mess, because at the same time all of it had to be a secret, people are such, irrational, and they do what doesn't bring them any good and we could've spend days and nights in peace and quiet and who knows what I could've gotten from him, and this way, nothing, as if he'd never come.

The Car

Here we are, at the corner of Gerinina and Krivokapićeva Street, now we have to turn left to Puhalovićeva and if there's no parking space at the beginning of the street, we'll drive on across the meadow, even though that's not allowed, but who's gonna see us now, straight to the entrance to the Holy Trinity Park and somehow squeeze through between a portable toilet that's always locked and we've never actually seen anyone use it, and is that a toilet after all, but now we've already passed the Church of Saint Pavijan and we are at the exit from this sanctuary because we haven't switched lanes in time, we enter Svagušina Street and see a parking place in front of the department store, but as we don't need anything from it now, we think that it wouldn't be fair, because yesterday we drove around it for more than half an hour and no one would

move for the life of it, so in the end we drive down Strahimir Avenue to the edge of the city and we're going to spend the whole day at some lousy center where even the beer is warm and where we can't find what we need, not to mention how long it takes us to remember, angry and furious, what we actually need, and honk-honk, what the hell, why does always someone have to honk, well, we haven't yielded to an invalid, and we're just entering the Veterans' Street, irony or what, who would believe what all can happen to you, I'm getting out and taking the tram, the wife says, this makes no sense, wait, I say, I remembered what to do, down in the Centre there's that alley by China Shop, there's got to be a place, I know it, I'm sure that there's space there, I just don't know if it'll be big enough for a station wagon, how many times I've told you we need a smaller car, not another one, but smaller, and there you go now, but we'll go for it anyhow, perhaps someone left some space open, calm down, please, trust me, at least this once, later we'll see

who's gonna go to school and excuse the kids for being late, and I can't do it, I have that inspection coming today, ha-ha, I really want to know where we're going to park, stop here when I tell you, they all yell, just a little bit more, you can't leave me alone in this chaos, eh, when have they built this, god, before our very faces, what monstrosities, the place we live, eh, it makes you wanna move to some normal place, and that's what I wanted to suggest, it would be better for children, more quality to our lives and such things, we'd have time for everything, we wouldn't be late, for God's sake stop already, she screams and bangs her hands against the airbag, do I have to open this shit for you to start listening, always the same with you, why do you have to do everything by force, go fuck yourself, you and your temper, have you ever asked yourself how can everyone else be on time, and, here we go, Guttenbrok Street, there's parking space here, we're a bit far, but we can all walk together and talk, but look at this moron, he really had to steal my spot,

fuck, what's happening this morning, I'm out of luck, it's not my day, ok, no more, goodbye, see you all in the evening, are you crazy, how are we gonna get to work from this fucking hellhole, and you can take the kids home, there's no way I'm gonna excuse them for this, c'mon, man, take us downtown and then go get lost to whichever peaceful place on earth you want, don't even bother coming back, bah, who are you to, and crash and thud from the inside and the outside, a miracle, two crashes at the same time, and two blows, a man comes out, all pissed, pulls up his pants and watches us going after each other's throats, the kids watching, he doesn't get it, other drivers honk, you've really picked a place to fight, we glance at the kids in the backseat, cool, says the younger one, finally a real brawl.

Persistence

When I was seventeen, it seemed to me that the only poet who understood the world was Cesare Pavese. My friend Pjer's and my veneration of his name grew to unreachable heights of a cult and we considered that all the poems we wrote, and which did not show stylistic or thematic similarity to Pavese's, were just horrible. We strived to be lonely because he was lonely too, lonelier than any other creature in the world. We avoided people, especially women, which was particularly hard on me. But I had to keep my standards.

Before we replaced Pavese with some other, better poet, we decided to spend the New Year's on my island and far away from anyone, on a distant promontory, watching the sea and reciting his poems to the rocks and the pines. With this we also wanted to show to all of our friends and

acquaintances how pathetic their drinking and partying were, how much we despised the masses that could not touch the beauty and delight of poetry.

Dressed in the heavy dark blue navy overcoats we'd bought at the army surplus store in Split, we boarded the ship and spent the full two hours of the journey on its open upper deck, freezing, but persistent in our intention to be different.

We spent the evening walking around the cemetery and getting down to deserted beaches, proud of our power of staying away from our rampant peers, cramped up in the semi-darkness of a bar or a club. We also made a plan for tomorrow, for that magnificent party no one had ever thrown.

Despite my parents' dissatisfaction and their attempt to persuade us to, nevertheless, like all people, greet the New Year at the party in the hotel, we remained persistent, filled our backpacks with food and wine and headed out already at dawn. In two hours, we were at our promontory, admiring

the sea and the wind that slowly crept into our bones. Soon we found an old army bunker, overgrown with macchia, cleaned it up a bit and started a fire. This was supposed to be a nice shelter until the evening when our solitary performance was supposed to take place.

Perhaps the fire that burned weakly was not the only reason why we started feeling cold and uneasy, stubbornly refusing to admit it to each other. But poets are not blind to the soul's state and soon we eagerly craved for midnight, so we could, without the fear of defeat, head back to the civilization, to the hotel and the club, towards all those beautiful girls we thought were waiting for us and admiring us. Impatience grew with the full moon that pierced our bodies with its glow and wrought out of them monstrous sighs of pain. Twenty meters from one another, each on his own bow of a crooked pine, we shouted at the moon with all our might, screamed as loud as we could, trying to bequest it

irrevocably with our convictions. That soul's song the words would only make unintelligible.

Drunk from wine and coldness, we were convinced that we had left the midnight far behind us and that we needed to hurry to get to the hotel before dawn and share our joy with the most persistent ones. Whenever the narrow path and the light allowed it, our fast pace turned into running. Soon we were at the reception, at the entrance into the world we scorned yet for which we longed. We were sure that at this time no one would ask for tickets. But at the reception desk there was a guard who examined us and motioned us to get inside. We offered him our hands to be the first ones to wish him all the best, and he just straightened himself in his chair and said, "You're early, don't you know that no one comes before ten?"

Joe, Jim, Jack And John

Jurica wanted to be Jack and that's how the whole thing with the four of us began. Every day we would meet at the café under the film archives where it never was crowded, the place wasn't hip. Jack gave us names; Joe, Jim and John, and we had to buy pipes and tobacco called Flying Dutchman, which ate up all of our monthly allowance. The pipes worthy to be hanging from our mouth were again chosen by Jack, and for that, as well as for tobacco, he had to travel all the way to Trieste where at that time everything one could brag about could be bought. We needed to find money for the trip too.

The story was that we sat at the café for afternoons on end, drank rum and addressed each other with sir. Our sentences had to be nice and logical, and it was highly desired they contain no intimacy whatsoever. We also had to be very reserved to-

wards anyone outside our circle, so at our table we always sat alone. Every day at five o'clock sharp we would order tea and drink it without sugar, saying to each other: how gallant, how gallant.

On occasion, at the film archives' stage, Jack would organize a private dance performance by beautiful girls from a local dance club. He could do that because he was the club's janitor and knew just about everyone. The three of us had to sit in the front row and by no means, even after the show, were we to communicate with the dancers, because that wouldn't be gallant. We felt like gods who had created the world in which they were not allowed to participate.

We were persistent, and we whiled our hours like that until the summer brought two Swedish women to our table. No one except Jack was to speak with them. He soon went to show them the movie hall, and we waited in hope that they would put up a hot show for us. But we never saw the Swedish women again, and we also never learned

what happened that evening, because our politeness never allowed us to ask. At that point, we already knew how to keep up our English appearances.

After the summer, when the school started again, we met again each with his own pipe and the sweet-smelling tobacco in his pocket. We waited for Jack. But he never showed. We asked the girl who worked at the bar if she knew when he would come. Next summer, she said, maybe, if at least one of those two Swedish girls of his lets him.

Quickly we put away our pipes and downed our rum, went to a small bistro across the street, barely managed to make our way to the bar and ordered some beers. Soon we competed against one another by telling stories about our summer holidays, but I know, from the way we told them, that each of us was torn by the desire to find out what it would be like somewhere up there, in the cold north, pressed between two Swedish women.

The Truck

Eh, that was a thing to remember! That grey truck, I think Hanomag was the name, as it burst into the village and stirred everything alive. There was no creature that did not crawl its way into the front yard to feast its eyes on the thing never seen before. A tall, mustachioed man with a French hat on his head came out of the truck, his hand on the door as if holding a dear friend he never separated from, and asked in a confident voice: “Can someone get me a bucket to water this beast?”

The bucket was found in a second and the truck’s large mouth opened. Its engine smoked and one could feel its steamy breath even if standing far down on the ground. The tall man wrapped a piece of cloth stained with motor oil around his hand and gently turned its aluminum cap, tilting his head to a side. It looked as if right then, right

there, in front of our very eyes, he had invented that truck. Finally, he removed the cap and got lost in the cloud of steam that hissed from the truck as if from a locomotive. Then, like some devil from hell, he grabbed the bucket and started pouring water. Soon everything was calm. He put the cap back on, wiped the reservoir with that dirty cloth as if caressing it, lowered the hood, perked up like a rascal woodpecker and faced the audience. He jumped off the fender like a wizard, handed the bucket to a woman nearest to him and said thank you. He climbed back into his beast and soon it let out its whirr. He pressed the horn three times and gave us a sign to get out of the way so he could turn.

Juri and I ran after him like crazy, we caught up with him around the bend where he had to slow down and far from everyone's eyes we grabbed on the iron bar that stretched all along the back of the truck. We bent our knees and just hang there, glancing at each other and laughing with excitement. We agreed to jump off at the exit onto the main

road, where the truck needed to slow down again before it started speeding down the stretch of flat ground. But none of us would unglue from it, we wanted to experience just a tiny bit of that divine feeling.

At the next moment, the speed was so great that we dared not to let go and we both started to panic. Tears welled up in our eyes almost simultaneously. No matter how hard we tried to keep our legs bent, from time to time we would drop them and receive painful blows even with the slightest contact with the ground. This lasted the whole life, even though the truck stopped after a couple of minutes.

We let go of the iron bar and barely managed to straighten our fingers that clutched onto it so hard. The tall guy appeared behind us and watched us in shock.

“Look at yourselves! You look like two turds rolled up in dust!” he said. “Have you got any idea what could’ve happened to you?”

We didn’t reply. We just stood there like two

little turds and then tried to improve the situation by removing the dust from our clothes.

“C’mon,” he said calmly. “Let’s go for a real ride.”

We rattled along crammed up in the front seat of the truck, soaked in its every movement and again enjoyed in the best of all possible worlds. Before he drove into the village, he pressed the horn three times and stopped at the same place as before. He opened the door and shouted, “Can someone get me a bucket to water this beast?”

The Heralds

I usually have my first morning coffee with my friends at a little bistro at the town's quay, always facing the sea. I don't take pleasure, like tourists who come from the city to take a short break from all the noise and commotion, in the fishermen and the seagulls, or the morning's stillness. All of this is already in me and I often imagine myself part of that everyday scenography. But today I just can't unglue my gaze, perhaps somewhat obtrusive, from a family of four sitting at a table in front of me. There's nothing that can tell me whether they're foreigners or ours because all of them are immersed in their iPads and are not giving any attention to the beverages waiting in front of them or to the world that's surrounding them and whose center they've occupied. At first, they seem like yet ano-

ther sad family deprived of words and communication by the triumphs of the Internet. Perfectly calm and focused on their screens, they present themselves as an excellent material for animosity towards new technologies. The only thing attracting attention is their refrained yet sumptuous laughter, and only when I catch all of them turning their heads at the same time and looking in the same direction, and then quickly returning back to their screens, do I understand that they are communicating among themselves. I'm about to share a word or two about alienation with my company, ready to call it the new disease of the society, but then I suddenly remember, who knows why, one of Pasolini's texts, its title, if I'm not mistaken, *The Discourse' of Hair*. I think it is set somewhere in former Czechoslovakia and it describes two long-haired beatniks who are only sitting and keeping quiet, but their solitary appearance is more than enough to mark the arrival of a time in which they will

infect almost the whole world. And just as the two of them were once the lonely heralds whom only few could understand, let alone justify, perhaps this family now is the reason why I'm biting my lip until it hurts.

An Important Notice

We leave the island at night. Waking up, washing, hurriedness and fear from running late. Checking our suitcase and pockets, a feeling we've forgotten something, which we cannot shake. Quickly running across sleeping streets, waiting for the bus that takes us to the boat and then waiting in line to buy a ticket. And dawn out in the open sea. A whole ceremony so much like the great endeavors.

Before departure there's just enough time to run to the bakery and get some hot pastries. The delight will make the journey bearable.

Under the yellow light of a streetlamp, leaning against the doorway of his bakery, he is standing and smoking. His face and hair completely white, even whiter than the white smoke he patiently and with pleasure releases into the sky. I have to touch him to get inside. Is there anything fresh? I ask,

although I know there is. Yes, yes, he replies, although he knows I know, and points inside with his cigarette. Black trays lining the counters hold several kinds of bread and pastries, still steaming. I point at chocolate croissants, I want two. The employee I never see during the day and can't tell whether or not he lives on the island, places them in the bag, and I give him the money.

On the deck of the ferry ready to sail out, leaning against the fence, I observe the sleepy harbor. The bakery and its lonely light fill me with the warmth I cannot comprehend. If that white man who is still smoking at the door decided to leave, the world would cease to exist.

My Little Radio

Hear all! Hear all! Don't buy Pepica's bread, it's charred and filthy, I shouted like a maniac and ran around the town's quay and through the narrow alleys, waving my arms whenever I ran into someone and hastily explained what tragedy and insolence were at place. One of my daily chores was to stop at Pepica's before going to school and buy a kilo of white bread because that's where my parents, for as long as I could remember, always bought bread although they were always on good terms with Rašeta whose bakery stood right across the way from our house and it would've made more sense, it seemed, to buy bread from him. Rašeta's son, Mario, was ten and a year younger than me in school, so it wasn't exactly suitable to spend too much time with him, but when playing warriors, which usually took place in early spring and

occupied nearby hills, we could spend as much time together as we wanted without fear because this was a neighborhood war in which every soldier was precious, especially one younger than yourself because you could order him around as much as you wanted. We came back as friends from one of such wars in which I wasn't as cruel in giving orders and we openly continued to spend time together. Every morning, after I bought a loaf of bread at Pepica's, I would run to his father's bakery, fly in across the shop in two long strides greeting his mother who was cutting and selling bread behind the counter, and run through the second door into the darkness of a backroom in which he, with incredible slowness on which I envied him, put on his shoes, drank warm cocoa with cookies or toast his parents made from leftover bread, searched for books and put them in his bag all the while trying to do a hundred other things and never succeeding in finishing them. Every two minutes his mother appeared at the door and told him to hurry, and sometimes his

elder brother who was by then already kneading and baking bread with his father came in, yelled at him and smacked his head, just so to show him who was the boss around there, but all of it somehow along the way, as if he hadn't even come because of that. In Mario's preparations for school there was no panic, but, it seemed to me then, endless family love in which everyone cared for everyone else. In his morning world I tried to make up for the sternness and emptiness of my own mornings in which, in dull silence, all by myself, I performed the actions of washing my face and putting my clothes on, warming my milk and crumbling my bread, taking my books and all other things my mother, before she went to work at half past five, had neatly arranged and left at the usual and visible places.

Hear all! Hear all! Don't buy Pepica's bread, it's charred and filthy, I kept shouting that morning until I reached Rašeta's bakery, and then, doing my best to conceal my heart's hellish pounding, walked

inside and asked for a kilo of white. Mario's mother, Auntie Maja, took a cloth mesh bag out of my hand and pushed a kilo of pure, warm white bread inside. Her question shivered in the cloud of air that rose in the wake of my galloping departure, after I'd literally ripped the bag out of her hand. But I didn't go on into the backroom to enjoy in Mario's family idyll, hoping perhaps in secret that some part of me had also become its invisible member, instead I stormed away into the quiet of my place. Some unintelligible noise filled my ears and soon my head could only produce tears and the wish to disappear. It took a while until the excess of that miserable load poured out and allowed me to recognize my embarrassment because I wanted to prove my friendship in such a blatant and vile way. My lips clenched, I put my books in my bag, washed my face and waited in front of the mirror until my eyes became white again, and then left to school.

Ah, this is Rašeta's bread, my father said at lunch.

How come you didn't get it at Pepica's? my mother asked.

It was all charred, I said.

Not bad, my father said.

Better than Pepica's, my mother agreed.

From then on, we always bought our bread at Rašeta's. Every morning before school I'd go down to the bakery in my slippers, buy the bread and put it in my bag, glancing at the door that led to the backroom, then I'd turn around, say thank you and go back to my lonely kitchen. I would cut the bread, spread all the treasures my mother had prepared over it, and take my endless time to prepare for school. I made up for the magical darkness of Mario's back room with a small, stuttering radio that stood on the open window and noisily chased away my anxiety in all directions.

The History Of The World In Three Lines

This is one of those exceptional moments that always catch us by surprise and draw out of us more than we think we can give. Of course, it's always about the persons we're talking to, they inspire us with their uncalled-for presence and their freedom from the standard conventional limitations. Nothing but the stimulus.

And so, the other night, I was standing by the extinguished fireplace in which, next to the cast-iron baking lid that had been used to cook the octopus on the occasion of some regatta, only a few coals were still smoldering, and served as an additional company for two girlfriends who stepped away to roll and smoke a joint. But soon, as it usually happens, we were joined by a skipper,

my long-time acquaintance, who on different occasions proved to be quite a good company, but whom I always kept at a comfortable distance. When they asked what I thought about the current political moment and didn't I think that the left had began looking more and more like the right, I laconically attempted to disparage the question by thinking that it didn't become the moment and by replying that from the first primitive cultures to the modern society of today only one question always mattered: who held the power and who ruled the majority. Then that's like with the animals, the skipper remarked. Not at all, I replied, it's much sadder and much worse, because the humans in their tortured history managed to develop all the attributes that should allow them to be different from the animals, but this did not help them to come any closer, even if for an inch, to the world they are creating as their unattainable essence. It turns out that those attributes are just an

illusion, which is the only human category susceptible to change.

C'mon, said one of the girls, some topic you chose, are you high or something?

On Hopelessness

Sometimes I feel hopeless. I sit for hours on end and smoke one after another, the landscape slowly fades until it completely disappears and some different world appears before my eyes. Why have I chosen to live here? Would it be better somewhere else? Am I even capable of planning my life or do things just happen on their own? Am I the real owner of my own life? Why do things always look different under the everyday surface? Would I be different if I were somewhere else? Why don't I have faith? Why do I stay faithful to everything I stop loving? Can safety make up for love? Does every passion have to spend itself and turn into boredom? Does constancy exist? What if until the end of my days I don't feel anything but what I've already felt? Is there a point in asking questions

that cannot be answered? Is there someone who could offer me some answers? Why do I feel hopeless?

Civilization

Yet another thing that makes us different from the tourists is the fact that we never or only rarely eat at restaurants? This unsaid unease is a commonplace of a small island town. But our dear friends who are guests in our house are adamant and persistent, they are almost blackmailing us, they will most certainly get offended if we don't let them take us to dinner to the fancy restaurant whose terrace borders on the beach. My wife and I keep declining, while our son, who is not even seven years old, jumps up and down on the couch and keeps repeating in the rhythm of his hopping: Let's go! Let's go! We're finally disarmed, sense and friendship have won over the rigid norms of customs.

The table is right next to the water, if we stretch our legs a little, we could touch it. It is one of those

quiet summer evenings when nothing moves. We've just finished some excellent fish and now with a bottle of good wine we're immersing into the story of a return winter visit to the continent where our friends live. Our son has found a better company at the neighboring table, we warn him not to pester, but his new friend's father convinces us that there is no reason to stop their game.

Suddenly some woman stands up and points at the octopus that has spread itself in the shallows and is now checking the air with its tentacles, uncertain whether to get out or not. Many are already standing up and all of a sudden, the quiet night is filled with clamor and excitement. My son is already at the beach with his new friend, he extends his arm into the sea and catches the octopus, and then he resolutely smashes it against the wall. He repeats this several times and the clamor dies down. When the octopus' vital signs die down too, he grabs it by the head and proudly brings it to our table. His new friend is right beside him and he

visibly admires the catch. But his father angrily orders him to get back to his table. He hugs him and quietly explains something to him. In the dead silence we cannot miss the quiet word: barbarians.

Everything I Touch, I Turn To Dust

When I was leaving home, she says, my father told me what that small pocket on my jeans was for. Always keep a hundred kunas in it, so you can call a taxi and leave the place that's causing you pain.

I don't imagine him as a father who was afraid, but as a father who knew.

Her loves affairs were violent and blind in their devotion; perhaps that's why they were so complete and so tragic. When in those rare moments during our encounters, she separated herself from her life in order to share a story with me, she could have evoked an image of a woman floating above pleasure and yearning for the power that could bring her back to her body. She would hold my hand and frantically squeeze it, she would sing words that would stop in front of me together with her gaze, because I was not the one she was talking to, he

must have been at the other table, sailing at some foreign seas, disinterested and different in his dedication. Mesmerized by his juices, she pushed them into my body and I soon felt his blood and gunk spread through my veins wreaking havoc. If anything was left of me, it was just so that I could helplessly clench my fists.

Now we're sitting at a small bistro, for a long time now she's been free and alone. She saves her long fingers for coffee and cigarettes. I'm thinking of what I could say to a woman who left me, and I never even belonged to her. If I said something, she might look for that small pocket on her jeans.

The Truth Of The Image

In this photo, I remember it well, the two of us were at daggers drawn. Your mother and I, we were seriously thinking about separating, I nonchalantly tell my little girls after we've taken out all those old albums with photos of our families. It is one of the last paper photographs, made before photo albums stopped making any sense and backed down before the ruthless aggressiveness of the screen.

They've come back from their studies and allowed me to be amazed by how all of a sudden they are so adult and smart, independent and already women. They will remain such during the holidays, until they leave and turn into my little girls again, when the dread of what might happen to them in the world where there's no one to protect them will crush my body. We're gathered around a small wooden table in our living room, they're sitting on

the floor, their mother and I on the couch. We're craning our necks every time the page is turned, and the album begins to circle around together with our comments and laughter. Their mother does not participate in this, she is persistently staring at the TV, but her persistence tells me that she's keeping track of every photograph and every commentary. Mom, one of the girls asks, is it true that in this picture you wanted to get separated? Ah, she answers without removing her eyes from the screen, you know how it is with him, first it's this then it's that. The sisters are laughing, they're holding the album together and trying to find the truth in the photo. What would've happened, I wonder, if we had separated, gotten a divorce? Would this last paper photo in which the photographer pushed us so close together that it still hurts expose intolerance in our smiling, happy faces? Or was the photo more patient than us, taken for the future in which every time when one of us sees it, we will learn a different truth?

Our little girls get up, slide in between us, they want us to squish against them. They set our arms around their shoulders and pay attention that every detail is the same as in the photo. They're setting up their smiles, and ours. They are making us come so close together that I can barely take it. There, the older one says, if it weren't for this photo in which you were getting a divorce, you would never have been crammed up so close together. (Happy?)

Pegasus

When I get so angry with my wife that I regret having ever met her, I get out of the house and go to the paddock where my horse grazes, says my friend who I have surprised with an unannounced afternoon visit. I take the horse to the stable, put a saddle on him, mount up, and get going. He takes me where he wants, or I steer him, we never know where we're going to end up. We wander up and down the vineyard paths, climb up a hill, stop and watch everything that's in our sight. There's not much talk, he says, I occasionally pat his neck and that's all we need.

We're sitting in his wine cellar, at some distance from his house, where he receives friends his wife doesn't like. Even now, when she's gone to her parents to stay there for an undetermined amount of time, when his treacherous children are away too,

because she's taken them with her to that sudden trip, he doesn't let the unwanted into his house. Still, the air is filled with the aroma of freedom and wine, he knows how to set up the mood in which it doesn't take long to start thinking you're someone else. Every glass is a card that exposes us. The moisture of the womb we futilely want to crawl back into conquers us with ease. She becomes the queen whom he loves and hates, curses and summons, abandons and conquers, tames and loses, kisses and chases away, she becomes the woman that has nothing in common with his dreams and that forces him to stay so firmly on the ground.

Neither my horse, he says, has anything to do with her. But she doesn't know that now, when she's gone, he can offer me no comfort.

The Woman I Loved

It's summertime. We're in love. Tired from our walk, and still far away from the apartment where we'll continue to make love, we look for a table on the terrace at a harbor café. The place is packed so we decide to ask an elderly couple to share the table. The woman that's well past her prime, but she manages to cheat her age with some excellent makeup, with a neat, white face on which wrinkles are shining, her posture upright even when she is leaning back and relaxing, the woman shows interest. Without a word, with benevolence and curiosity, she measures us up and down. He is reserved and it's obvious he doesn't approve of some strangers at his table. He keeps turning his head away and searching for something in the distance.

She starts up a conversation, asks where we're from, he tells her not to bother. No bother at all, I

say and look away. And that's it. The thoughts and questions we could share remain silent in our mouths. The discomfort dresses us in the same suit. I pour beer in our glasses, take a good sip and lean back in the chair. She follows suit and it seems we've never been so far apart.

I remove my flip-flop and put my leg on her chair, between her legs. She presses her thighs together, instinctively, but not even a moment passes, and I feel her muscles relax, just enough to let the insistent lover in. We gaze into each other's eyes and when I touch her panties, she opens her mouth ever so slightly and shows that the world around us no longer exists. I caress her with my eyes and follow her voiceless sighs. Soon she closes her eyes and her thighs press together again, tighter than before. I leave the lover clenched and glance up at the woman, perhaps a bit too conspicuously. Her gaze moves from my love's face to mine. Smiling, she closes her eyes.

Shameless Desire For Existence

This happened, I remember, a long time ago, I couldn't have been more than twenty years old. I was still alive. Going out, searching. Vainness resided in my steps. And on that very Saturday morning I decided to go back to my student room, open a book, and start a new life. Last night's drunkenness was leaving me together with the lust that had found no one.

Empty, desperation piling up inside of me, I walked into my building's hallway, closed the surrounding world behind me, and headed up the stinky, wooden staircase. Halfway up, there sat a woman. A mature woman, her eyes wide open and watching, but seeing nothing. In a position suggesting that she was taking a breather from drunkenness, swaying slightly, her hands keeping her face from escaping, she rested her elbows on her knees

and parted them open so that the blackness at the bottom of her being was clearly visible through the dark nylons. Mesmerized by the incomprehensible magic of supremacy, I knelt down one step beneath her and, looking straight into her eyes, placed my hands on her thighs, feeling something else. Soon I was sliding towards the core of her nothingness, not lowering my stone gaze even if for a second. Hot and wet and dark, that's what it was like, protected by the clothes, which I tried to penetrate in an attempt to reach the life that promised me nothing. I slashed and entered, expanded and went back as deep as I could, even though all this wasn't enough to disappear completely. But I was disappearing in her eyes that just wouldn't blink, that wouldn't make me close my own eyes and die completely.

“I'm hungry,” she said suddenly, her voice tired.

I run into the nearest store, buy bread and salami, make a sandwich right there at the cash register, and hurry back. I don't have time to think.

Unease, shame, guilty conscience run behind me, a whole horde of familiar and new, hungry and insatiable feelings run right after them. They follow that life-saving sandwich of mine that is bouncing in my hands and that now I am clenching without a reason on that stinky, rotten wooden stair where my salvation no longer sits.

The Village Idiot

No referendum could ever show who we are and what we want to be, how the things are and what could make them better, there's no wisdom or hiding here, whoever touches into that wasp's nest will get his portion. Our miserable desire to show that we're better and different proves a suicide mission every time we open our mouth in his presence and he detects mockery in our voice. It hurts just as much when he fails to notice us as he begins his address, as the daily show in which we play ourselves takes place, with the necessary danger that something everyone knows but no one says out loud could be heard. We could never live like that, but we begrudge him that freedom, that tireless energy freed from the everyday life, and we readily let ourselves sink into it, without fear of failure,

full of lucid moves that portray us in a way we would never be able to portray ourselves.

There's no step or gesture that could be hidden before that shrewd eye, he stores the information in the place beyond our reach and he fires it back at us when we least expect it. The gaze that does not look at anyone, but sees everything and everyone, as he disembarks the ferry, as he returns from the short trip to the mainland, just to show that he can do that whenever he wants and that even this short trip is enough for him to see that even there things are better than here, and here he goes, screaming down the quayside that we haven't deserved anything better than what we have, and we know very well what it is. If he ruled, if only for a day, he would've fixed everything those good-for-nothings, those troublemakers, those bastards have ruined, and all of us would have it as nice as the shit in high cotton, isn't it so, he asks, isn't it so? Yes, we fall in his trap in front of everyone, because what else can we say, and maybe it seems that in this moment we

could do something like this too. There he is, he says, I've got his vote! And what would you change first?

We turn our head to someone else, we pretend we don't see him and that nothing has happened, we come up with another story or ask a different question, because if we say the truth, the people will think that we're village idiots too.

Atlantis

We're in love and ecstatic, we can't decide whether we'd like to walk around all day and show ourselves to people, or whether we'd like to take the day just for ourselves, we can't stop talking and suddenly we want to fit our whole lives into these couple of days. We believe that our naked island is turning into a paradise in which God still talks to us and laughs, she says she wants to stay here forever and we say, but of course, how could there be anything besides this island? Suddenly we no longer need cities or people, our desire to leave and see something we imagined was life becomes a mistake that now makes us laugh, with ease we could prove to everyone that only this is worth living for, this freedom that has been in front of us all this time and we didn't know it, but now we've made a decision, we plan to become fishermen and farmers

because that's what we want and we're not ashamed and no one can touch us. We walk around the island, we go to places we've never gone to before, we wonder how we managed to miss them until now, we watch the fields and the sea with different eyes, we examine the grandfather's house in which no one lives anymore and which is about to fall apart. We find the place for the garden, for the vineyard, for the chickens and the goats, just as passionately we visualize the place for our living room and our kitchen in which we will prepare organic food, which we'll farm and cook all by ourselves, where we will meet friends and where our children will grow. We invent names for this heavenly life which lies before us and which we finally live just the way we want to live it even though it still hasn't happened because she has to go back to Zagreb to finish the last year of her studies, she needs to convince her parents that she's made a choice and that that's what she wants and that...

We wait for the following summer a little bit

differently than we used to wait until now, and in spring we receive a letter from France in which she tells us that her life has stayed the same, that we played such an important role in it, and that, right now she and her friend, the archeologist, stand on the cliffs of the western shores, watch the ocean and try to determine where exactly Atlantis used to be. And that's, she says, very important because this was a civilization so similar to the one we wanted to start the summer before.

The Poet

We run over the rocks, we jump over the shrubs, we climb the heaps of stones to see a little bit farther, but still not as far as we would want to. We shout and scream as hard as we can, as if we've gone crazy, anger comes over us because we cannot let this freedom down, and we have no one to share it with. If we were wizards, we would ban everything else and we would make all of this live again. Tired from nothing, we turn into an exhausted horse that has let its head fall down, or into a vine that has been left standing alone in the field, neither dead nor alive. We compare our life to the lives that are about to extinguish because we cannot do anything else and we don't want to, with our teeth clenched we try to shake away the pain, which we cannot define, and we go home.

A stranger waits for us there, he smiles and is

happy to see us although he doesn't know us, I'm a poet, he says, and I came to ask you to show me your poems. We're surprised and angry at the same time, we show him that he is welcome, but that it isn't nice so suddenly, out of the blue. Still, we let him into the house, put some wood into the fireplace and light the fire, we take out the wine and offer it to him. We watch as he relaxes and as he trusts this life he doesn't know anything about, but he would certainly like to see those poems everyone talks about. We take out the notebook and read, then rip the pages out and throw them into fire. He is confused, he asks if we know them by heart, if we have copied them somewhere, it would be a shame for such treasure to vanish, especially the one that he liked a lot and that talks about loneliness.

We pour more wine, say cheers.

These are old poems, we say, new ones should be written.

All That I Miss

In that fit of privation, I went on everyone's nerves. All it took was to remember something and, at that very instant, it would warp out of shape, fall apart, being to hurt. I saw clearly everything around me, all the beautiful world that surrounded me, but I somehow wasn't able to reach it. Longing only.

Come to Vienna with me, a friend invites me. Just for the weekend, I have to take care of something.

We're driving to that Vienna of his, and he eagerly tells me how his life has changed and got meaning, his family and one business are there, and in Zagreb are his friends and his other businesses, and it's not much of a distance, it's almost one city. What one lacks, the other offers.

We see his friends most of who are his clients. He maintains their computer systems, gives advice,

fixes everything that has given out when he was away and could not be cured from a distance. He laughs with them and talks, relaxed, in a manner I have long forgotten. As we drink at bars after he has taken care of his business, he teases smiles on my face and feeds me thoughts that could be hope. I would want a life like this.

A piece of cake, he says. He takes me to see his friend who, as it turns out, I know from the days of youth and happiness. He decided to start a new life, so he moved to Vienna and put an ad saying he was looking for any kind of work. Now he lives in a large apartment with an old lady who was left all by herself and who needed care and comfort. He makes enough money for a heavenly life for both of them, and after that good life is over, he'll get her apartment.

An old lady opens the door, she knows my friend and hugs him with one hand, because she has to lean on a cane with the other. We enter into the smell of prescription medicine, old age and

illness. But this time the illness made itself at home in our acquaintance's body. He is lying in his protegee's bed, running a fever, and now she is the one who cooks tea for both of them. In the same bed, they nibble cookies from the same box, because she doesn't have enough strength to tend and look after him at the other side of the apartment, in his room.

If you need anything, just let me know, my friend tells him.

Thanks, but I don't need anything, she takes care of everything.

And the conversation moves in my direction. We've come just at the right moment, because one of her friends, probably the last who has remained in this world of hers, has been complaining that she can no longer go on like this, on her own, and that she would gladly share her wealth with someone. But that one, he says, still doesn't miss a day to somehow drag herself to her favorite pastry shop and, dressed up like a real Viennese lady, have her cup of coffee and her favorite cake. So it's only

logical that you meet up with her at that pastry shop...

We arrive before the arranged time and take a table, my friend, who is going to help me communicate with her, and I, his friend who he is taking out of a dark tunnel. But she is already there, the waiter tells us this by asking us if we are meeting someone. We move to her table next to the giant window from which she can observe the world pass by. I carry such window in me.

The waiter still stands above us and waits. I'd like a beer, a large one. There's no beer, this is a pastry shop. Yes, there is, she says, and he walks out into the street, we watch him as he runs across and brings a bottle of beer from another coffee place. What an empress!

I tell her about me, about being lost. Her lips loosen and the sun shines into deep grooves in them. Her lipstick couldn't make its way into those canyons, but the white icing from the donut fills

them up completely. When she bites into the donut, it spills over her chin, and on her hands, just enough to draw attention to the purple veins that the bright light has left completely exposed. Those delicate, translucent female hands made of paper... maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, so someone might think I'm vulgar, but I can't stop myself from touching them, putting them between my palms and closing them inside for a while. The one, whoever this might be, who could get in the way is not here and she abandons herself to the moment, we talk for the sake of talking, we get lost in our similarity, it is clear that this is love, impossible, but love still. We agree that our life together would be hell.

If I stay in Vienna, I tell her many hours later, reluctant to let go of the most beautiful hand I have ever touched, if I stay, I say, I'd love to see you sometimes. Her lips quiver, together with the particles of the finest icing that dance in front of her

face. Her eyes pour into me, some of that water remains in them. The lake is clearly visible. Beautiful is that woman who is going to wait for me. Once she was just an old woman looking for help.

Adultery

It would've been easier, Your Honor, if I'd caught him in bed with another woman. I would've most likely turned and left, maybe I would've killed them both, maybe I would've killed myself. It would've been a happy ending. Dark, but happy for all. But this, can you even imagine? My whole world crushed in a second when I caught him naked in front of that shabby, old-fashioned, kitchen radiator which, to be honest, had always caused us trouble, when I saw him hug it and sigh and do it with him the same way he did it with me. First, I asked what he was doing, he got scared because he didn't know when I'd walked in and he twitched and groaned at the same moment. He remained pressed against it and I came close, really close, so he could not hide a thing. He stood there, all cramped, it must've hurt like hell. He couldn't take

it out, it got stuck in the radiator's ribs, or maybe he was just trying to hide what he'd been doing with it. I don't know how to describe the moment. I wasn't thinking. It was like I was doing the most ordinary thing in the world, but you can see yourself how far from the ordinary this was, at least according to how I see this world, I took a knife from the table and cut it off with one sharp move just under the head. The only fortunate thing was that the knife was Japanese, the one he'd just bought to fillet his fish. For a moment, it seemed I had put him out of his misery, because he jumped away immediately, full of hope, like an animal when it gets set free from a trap, yet one of its parts remains caught in it. He grabbed what was left of it, googled his eyes and tried to stop the bleeding, he knelt down on the floor and put his head on it, and then he rolled over, on his side, like those characters from the movies when they get shot. He didn't speak, he didn't yell, he just groaned ominously, like from a grave. I felt pity over him like

over a child whose toy you smash, and I started looking for the missing part. I thought, naively, I'd find it where he stood, but I was wrong, because it, obviously helpless without its master, had slid all the way to the ground leaving a bloody trail as it went, at first the trail was thick, then it grew thinner, barely visible. Following the trail, I saw it on the floor in a thick layer of dust. It appeared as if it slept like a little mouse rolled up in a ball of cotton, but I immediately (I even waved my hand), automatically, chased the thought away, because it seemed unsuitable for the moment like that. It would've been more appropriate if I reproached myself on account of keeping our place clean. I couldn't reach it with my fingers. Carefully, with the help of the knife, I managed to roll it out from under the radiator, and when it came out into the clear, all covered in dust (it looked like some creature from out of space, just born), I picked it up and tossed it to him. You're never putting this in me again, I said. I stood there in the middle of the

living room, the kitchen knife in my hand, and didn't know what to do next. All kinds of things could've happened. But, luckily, he passed out and I called an ambulance. I came over to him to have one last look. He was lying there, holding it in his hand, but feebly, it was still bleeding. I took the chopped off part, wiped the dust off of it, and tried to put it back to where it would've still been had it not humiliated me like it had. I'd held it in my hand so often that it seemed like it had been my possession, and now, when I truly owned it, when I could've taken it with me wherever I wanted, I didn't want it anymore. It made me sick. And I could no longer just give it back. I just held it there until the ambulance boys arrived. Sorrow and guilt fell upon me. I knew I caused what he did. They asked me what had happened. Adultery, I said.

To Myself

We sit at the terrace of our only and dearest bar at the town quay, our back toward a loud table at which arrangements are made about the masks and scenarios that should definitely be shown at the carnival, we learn firsthand what we missed last year because once again we were preoccupied with ourselves, politicians and rich men undress in front of us and run around in their undies, dirty at that, everyone is called out for and reminded of what they've forgotten, just for the sake of it, to make it clear that some haven't! We take pleasure in our invisibility and listen to that small delight of memories, to those directors who, better than professionals, put together films that concern their own lives, which have, elusive yet real, rudely passed before their very eyes, without anger an inspired playlet is being prepared whose only point is to pass

and to show the superiority of understanding. Characters are dissected with a sharp razor, no one is holy or important enough not to find themselves on this autopsy table where they want to show the anatomy of the soul, the color and purity of the blood, the size and shape of the heart, the amount of resentment cells in the soul, the percentage of loneliness and stupidity, a compressed motor skill unbecomingly exercised on the dear creature, the mobility and the variety of the tongue, untamable parts between the legs, the clotting of the gray mass, and a million other things invisible to common surgeons.

We learn that our little company are going to portray themselves as prostitutes, the only male at their table is delighted and he wants to be a pimp, but they don't even want to hear about it, you're going to be a gigolo, they say. Me? Yes, you, they keep repeating and listing the characteristic that should make him angry, but that wouldn't be very manly of him now, and there you have it, he is going

to be a gigolo. You don't have to act much, we recognize his wife's voice, a short silence and we already know one mask has fallen.

The company leaves shouting back and forth about the forgotten and reminding themselves about what they've agreed on, the superiority of our secretive position of a privileged voyeur pales and turns into jealousy. We pay for our coffee and try to remember when and why we stopped, where is that moment when things became so difficult for us that we froze and paused, forgot to laugh and be a part of something. How come we stopped getting angry with the lost? When did we start waving our hand at everything we could've stopped? Why do we keep giving up?

We hurry home like a thief who has stolen something from himself, we open the door and pause in front of every painting and photograph of the island and the customs we put on our walls in fear of losing them forever. Our town's coat of arms stands at the top of the mirror. We walk around

the house like a dead man who is puzzled by the
gray images of his ancestors caught as they eat in
the vineyard or laugh at some wooden boat's stern?
Do they belong to us? Do we belong to them?

In a panic, we search for the mask under which
we could see ourselves.

The Island I Loved

This year the olive harvest was poor, the vineyards failed because of disease, we didn't get the family fishing license, we can't register at the employment office to get support because this knowledge of ours about the land and the sea no one needs anymore. We haven't opted for tourism because we can't wait ten months to work for just two months a year and hope to live like normal people. Both economically and humanly. So that's what we have at home now, our wings have been singed, no one says anything at the table, and we are just waiting when those two good-for-nothings of ours will pull up stakes and leave the family, because they too suddenly think somewhere else it could be better. Besides, the season finished a long time ago and what little they earned they have long spent on a better life.

We fear that in the end there will be no one left to bury us.

There were years in our life when it was much worse, when every mouthful was counted and when we feared our electricity would be cut, because we had no money to pay for it. The clothes we wore fell out of fashion in pieces from being worn out, yet we always managed to patch them up and we knew that the island and the people we lived with would never abandon us. Now it seems like our island has abandoned us and we are left alone with our skills, without ships or factories, without people who create and make something every day. It seems that our island has sailed away with some strong outboard engine which we are not used to and left us to float in the air, and that this is not a dream.

But never mind the tears. It's Saturday and instead of spending it at the town quay, we are driving towards the field in which there is a little house

that belongs to our hunter-friends who are making lunch for all of those who came this winter to share the joy of hunt with them. The end of the hunting season must be special, even though the days spent in that house during the hunt were no small potatoes. Food delights and endless stories offered salvation from winter desolation, we showed spite against loneliness and absurdity, the southern wind and boredom, we enacted life at the best and most prestigious destinations in the world and the acting was better than the life itself.

From early in the morning, woodcocks, quails and pheasants are plucked, they were left to hang in the cellar for five days according to the best French and Italian recipes, the intestines are cleaned and turned into pâtés, hares are taken out of marinades, onions are chopped, prosecco and dried fruits are tasted, the best French cognac is sought for the end, the guests arrive with bottles of the best wine they produced this or some other

year. In all this immense desire for the perfect moment of pleasure that has to justify one whole meaning of a slow and questionable life, there is no room for everyday anxiety and tears, the entourage in a moment turns into privileged aristocrats that can finally turn their lonesome untouchableness and boredom into the pleasure of existence. The worried and the poor, the ones that are doing fine and the ones who would never leave, the ones who came back and the ones filled with doubts, the disgruntled and the lost, the cynics and the showoffs, the unwelcome and the respectable, the suspicious and the naïve, the unlucky and the reserved, all of them are now gathered here and they intend to take the pleasure out of this heavenly lunch and dinner, not realizing that by their participation in this feast dedicated to themselves, with their diversity, they have sided with the last guardians of the vanishing island.

Because after all this one of them says: for God's sake, if I could've offered this to those tour-

ists of mine, they wouldn't have come to their whole life!

We look at him, but we let his words flow by us. We want to remain unconscious. At least before this evening ends.

Where Is Our America?

To what extent is Karuza's writing similar, and to what extent it is different from the existing standards in contemporary Croatian literature? The simplest way to answer the question addressed in this manner is to offer a simulation of a kind of equation; it is similar, or, more precisely, it is different exactly to the extent to which his biography is different from other, somewhat typical and conventional, biographies. Unlike the writers, and not only writers, who started from the periphery and moved towards the center and stayed there, once and for all, Senko Karuza's curriculum vitae was exactly the opposite. He was born in Split (in 1957), he spent his formative years on the island of Vis, but after studying at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, he did not stay in the capital of Croatia, he did not go back to the capital of Dalmatia either,

instead he chose to come back and drop his anchor on Vis. Karuza has published a couple of books of short stories, he founded the Mare, Mare! Literary Festival, and while the foreigners and all kinds of curious onlookers besiege his island during summer, in winter months he travels to the continent or abroad. Sometimes he travels to literary sessions, sometimes privately, to visit his friends from the country or from abroad who pay back the “debt” of his hospitality, thus healing himself from winter loneliness, which, despite all affection for the island, is not easy to endure.

The Island is a Choice

This is a collection of prose fragments, stories that sometimes have the function of a conventional narrative, but that sometimes also seem like travesties as well as confessions that allow the writer to communicate his worldview stigmatized by the island and loneliness. Karuza is not one of those who think that every day is a Sunday or, in other

words, his love of the island is not brought down to summer frolicking and tourist vista with a camera and shrimp in one's hands. Finally, the island is like a woman one loves even when she is not in the best of moods. This writer turns the object of his observation around and around, lighting it from different perspectives, turning the camera into a *camara*, a chamber, and so revealing the ingredient only a refined photographer is capable of catching. He is not a seasonal island aficionado, he is not a scammer fantasizing about swindling the tourists, and he is neither an autistic person selling his wisdom as the only salvation.

This is the framework that is to be used to measure the validity of Karuza's conclusions communicated in the form of his stories and anecdotes. One needs to love the island, but, even more so, one needs to know how to endure it; like the person who set sail across the Atlantic in a trabaccolo, aware that this odyssey brings sunny, as well as stormy and difficult days. Like in everything else,

the island is a choice that is confirmed or disproved by the consistency of one's actions. Karuza is not a fashion model trading his own narcissism, even less someone parading around and turning the island landscape into a stage for presenting his exhibitionism. Among all possible gains and losses, in the choice between the continental and island existence, he simply chose the latter! If we were to employ a slight word play, we could find many reasons to conclude that for him the island is not (just) existence, but also essence. In clarioning his position towards the world, one with the insular tor, Karuza embraced the form of chamber story or a kind of confession marked by the fact that he materialized them in the first-person plural. Of course he did not choose *pluralis modestiae* by accident.

A Passatist and a Realist

By choosing this way of expression, Karuza seems to have wanted to preserve the patina of the patriarchal world, in which the logic of collective

opinion had a more than firm footing and in which any departure from the accepted rules of behavior was treated as blasphemy. Even if Karuza is the poet of his island (Vis), even if he is fictionalizing the island reality as well as the corruption caused by civilizational and tourist winds, it cannot be said that he idealizes it uncritically. On occasion he seems as a passatist, but he is also a realist, guided by his instincts and parental predestinations, aware that between the smelly asphalt of the city and airy Mediterranean panorama, adorned by olive trees and grapes, he is going to choose the latter. There's no pose in his choice, there's no regret for technophagic world that is stuffing itself with leftovers and that is, while not giving up on the commercial growth, not giving up on its own doom too. It is easy to prate that the island is beautiful, but one needs to survive on it even outside of the fast-passing summer months. It is easy to clink one's glass and empty the bottle of finest red wine, but the grapes need to be nurtured and the wine needs to

be produced. It is easy to parade about the town quay or have one's picture taken with the donkey, but only the one who endures the winter desert and gusts of the Bora knows what island truly is. There's nothing exemplary in this because the island, just like everything else around us, has its more attractive and its more bitter face.

What Beckett suggested a long time ago, that the Earth might end up uninhabited, was not some kind of phantasmagoria on the side of the founder of the Theatre of the Absurd. On the contrary, absurd is the fact that civilization is actually coming close to this possibility, and when he chose the island, Karuza simply showed he did not want to be held hostage by such world. That's why he shows some American tourist where our America is, that's why he explains how important remembrance is, that's why he writes a hymn to his Nonno who left the island only a couple of times during his life, that's why he explains that with the invasion of globalization and integration processes he needs

to forget all the pancetta grilled on twigs and branches, all the glasses of wine and all the ways and customs that allowed him to live to be ninety years old. All that makes up the island environment and the island life, all the chickens and goats, wine and brandy, fish and verdura should be taken to the middle of the field and set on fire. That's what Karuza says in his writing, turning the request for sterilization to irony and concluding that along with all those gifts of nature, with all the flora and fauna of the island, he should set himself on fire too. There's nothing strange in this; "for what are we without it," he asks, showing with his every gesture and his every sentence what he thinks about "progress" that is forcing its way even to the most distant and the most unspoiled island destinations.

The Best Food

Karuza's texts, his spicy bits sprinkled with anecdotes and ambiance, are marked by the division

between those up and those down, which is how continental and maritime or central and Mediterranean Croatia have already been distinguished in Slobodan Novak's *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*. The island presupposes extremes; it is too crowded in the summer, it is too desolate in the winter, and, by all accounts, its paradise-like or desert-like perspective hides the reasons why local fools and eccentrics go with such settings like a horse and carriage. A simple life on a solitary island, brought down to bare survival, understands that the author shares the same ductus. And Karuza proves to be exactly such, a writer who does not care about pretentious prattle, who does not legitimize himself either as a globalist or ecologist, but as a writer who, in the indigenous values of the island and its inhabitants, has found his footing. And his purpose. That's why he finds the assumptions "that only those who have failed come back" funny, that's why he explains that the life on the island begins only after the summer hubbub has passed, that's

why he dreads those grey and rainy days when everyone is at home, “like in some office where no one does anything.”

When meeting foreigners, but also friends with whom he spent his youth in the city, Karuza, communicating through first person plural, is sickened by the indolent world that may waste its whole life, and at that fail to produce, plant or sow anything, in a direct contact with the nature that offers itself to a person in a number ways and that should not be consumed by casting a passive glance through the lens of a camera or a hotel window. A quote illustrates best what this looks like in Karuza’s individual and insular version: “We’re still in our cove, far away from the nervous tourist race, we’re sticking sardines on a skewer, sardines our cousin from another island has brought, getting ready for this food, the best in the world, and as always, we need to utter those magic words saying that any other sea delicacy, compared to our sardines, can only, at least in August, hide under the table. We

turn the skewer and break the sardines with our hands, we lick the steaming fingers, and take pleasure watching as the fish splits to the bone and remains hanging on it like on a drawn bow, because we know that's where the secret lies, and then we take them off the skewer, steam them in a pot and sprinkle with coarsely chopped onions. This minute of waiting equals the torments of hell, but we're ready for anything because of the promise of brilliant sensation. When we take that first ideal bite, we feel we're the owners of all life, from whom, because they have nothing, no one can take that divine title or that divine nutritional moment."

Zdravko Zima

A Note On The Author

Senko Karuza was born in 1957 in Split and spent his childhood on the island of Vis. He was educated in Vis, Split and Zagreb, where he studied philosophy at Zagreb University. His short stories and columns have been published in many newspapers and magazines, and also included in various anthologies and reviews. His publications include: *Busbuskalai* (1997), *Ima li života prije smrti* (2005), *Tri krokodila* (with Branko Čegec and Miroslav Mićanović, 2005), *Vodič po otoku* (2005), *Teško mi je reći* (collected stories, 2007), *Kamara obscura* (2010), and *Prsa u prsa* (2016). Senko is the director of Mare, Mare! Literary Festival and the founder of the informal *Multimedia Mobile Centre for the Study of Alternative Ways of Survival on Small and Distant Islands*.

A Note On The Translator

Tomislav Kuzmanović translates between Croatian and English. His translations into English include *The Death of the Little Match Girl* by Zoran Ferić, *A Castle in Romagna* (with Russell Valentino) by Igor Štikš, *The Hill* by Ivica Prtenjača, *A Frame for the Family Lion* (with Celia Hawkesworth and Mima Simić) by Roman Simić, and *My Son Just Walks a Bit Slower* by Ivor Martinić, while into Croatian he has translated prose works, poetry and plays by Vladimir Nabokov, Ted Hughes, David Mamet, Tracy Letts, Colum McCann, Margaret Edson, Tim Winton, and others. His translations of fiction and poetry have appeared in *Absinthe*, *Granta Magazine*, Ugly Duckling Presse's *6X6*, *The Iowa Review*, *91st Meridian*, *Exile*, *eXchanges*, *Poetry International Web*, and *The International Literary Quarterly*. His work was

included in Graywolf Press' *New European Poetry Anthology* and Dalkey Archive's *Best European Fiction*. A graduate of Iowa's Translation Workshop, he works with the Festival of the European Short Story and teaches literary translation at the University of Zadar, Croatia.

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RELATIONS

The Journal of Croatian Literature

3-4/2018

Publisher Croatian Writers' Society

Editor-in-chief Roman Simić

Assistant editor Jadranka Pintarić

Proofreading Tomislav Kuzmanović

Croatian Writers Society

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Design and layout Maja Glušić

Prepress by Grafocentar

Printed by Grafocentar

ISSN 1334-6768

*The journal is financially supported by the Ministry of Culture
of the Republic of Croatia and by the Municipal Funds of the
City of Zagreb.*

