AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Most of us would agree that a translator's aim should generally be "to provide semantic equivalence between source and target languages" (Crystal 346). Despite the seeming simplicity of this definition, there are as many different beliefs about how translators should achieve this goal as there are theorists on the topic. Despite the many kinds of translation and rules which translators might follow, one matter on which translators commonly agree is that it is the translator's duty to render as accurately as possible the meaning of the source text into the target language. However, in aesthetic translation, translators must also consider form, content, tone, and the cultures of both the source and target languages. After taking these issues into consideration in my introduction, I then offer a translation of Olga Toakarczuk's novel *Prawiek i inne czasy*, or, as I have translated the title *Longago and Other Times*. I came to the source text through what Caryl Emerson defines as "the way of the poet" (84), seeing the translation, not as a "betrayal" of the original, but as a "release" of the potential of the novel.

LONGAGO AND OTHER TIMES, A NOVEL BY OLGA TOKARCZUK, TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH WITH INTRODUCTION

A Thesis

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Introduction

In *Dissemination* (1972), Jacques Derrida discusses the various translations of the word "pharmakon" from Plato's *Phaedrus*. When Plato uses the word "pharmakon," it can mean "remedy," "recipe," "poison," "drug," or "philter" depending on the context. In the various translations, according to Derrida, "pharmakon" has been rendered as all these words "through skewing, indetermination, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation" (1836). As Derrida says, it is not only due to the "imprudence or empiricism of the translators" that the "malleable unity of this concept" has been "obliterated," but it is due first and foremost to "the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation" (1836). The word is never mistranslated, but because of the word's mutable nature, its "unity" cannot be rendered into another language. This rendering of the "malleable unity" of words is not only one of the most difficult problems in translation, it is the very goal of translation.

Generally, a translator's aim, according to David Crystal "is to provide semantic equivalence between source and target languages" (346). Despite the seeming simplicity of this definition, there are as many different beliefs about how translators should achieve this goal as there are theorists on the topic. Beginning translators often try to learn certain rules that they believe will help them in the future. However, in *The Art of Translation* (1957), Theodore Savory uses twelve common translating rules to illustrate how much they often not only differ but even contradict each other:

1. A translation must give the words of the original.
2. A translation must give the ideas of the original.
3. A translation should read like an original work.
4. A translation should read like a translation.

5. A translation should reflect the style of the original.
6. A translation should possess the style of the translator.
7. A translation should read as a contemporary of the original.
8. A translation should read as a contemporary of the translator.
9. A translation may add to or omit from the original.
10. A translation may never add to or omit from the original.
11. A translation of verse should be in prose.
12. A translation of verse should be in verse. (49)

Quite often, translators will modify certain rules depending on the kind of translation they are attempting to complete. Crystal defines four different kinds of translation: pragmatic, ethnographic or sociolinguistic, linguistic, and aesthetic. "Pragmatic translation" demands accurate knowledge of a certain subject "as required for instructional manuals and much scientific research" (347). "Ethnographic or sociolinguistic translation" pays more attention to the "cultural backgrounds of the authors and recipients" (347). When translators wish to "convey the structural flavor of the original text," they use "linguistic translation." This is often conveyed "in a quite literal manner, emphasizing such features as archaisms, dialectisms, and levels of formality" (347). According to Crystal's taxonomy, the focus of "aesthetic translation" is on "preserving the emotional as well as the cognitive content" of a literary work (347).

Despite the many kinds of translation and rules that translators might follow, one matter on which translators commonly agree is that it is the translator's duty to render as accurately as possible the meaning of the source text into the target language. However, in aesthetic translation, translators must also consider form, content, and tone. Caryl Emerson offers a concise understanding of the aesthetic translator's role. The translator

comes to the text either by "the way of the penitent," or via "the way of the poet" (84). As the penitent, the translator follows a mechanical process, "one valuing equivalence" (84), meaning a translation as close to a word for word, literal rendering as possible. As the poet the translator perceives the translation "not as betrayal but as a release of potential, as a basically creative process" (84). The poet Jane Hirschfield adds that whichever method the translator uses, a translator's first obligation is to convey the particular strengths of a work. "If a startling directness of language is at the heart of a work, then straightforwardness should govern the new version as well" (65). According to Hirschfield, the translator should read the work "again and again and again for its meaning, its resonance, its kinetic and musical bodies, its ambiguities, rhetoric, grammar, images, and tropes" (60). The translator must not only translate the words of the text, but must also somehow find a way to translate the meaning for readers of the target language. When speaking about the translation of poetry, Hirschfield notes that the "poem that in its original form may contain a multitude of possible readings becomes in the translation a poem in which a particular interpretation is more likely to predominate—though if the translation is a good one, the new poem will also have its resonances and overtones, its unconsciously preserved wisdom" (60). This remains true for prose, and because a particular interpretation is more prevalent in a translation, this will "prompt several translations, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of the original" (Crystal 346).

For some writers there is a belief in an "ur-text," a universal idea within any work. This belief is a faith that the work one has written will say the same thing in any language. For example, when a Polish translator was about to translate *The Duino Elegies*, "Rilke gave his translator his blessing to do whatever was needed. He offered his full trust that whatever the Polish words, the *Elegies* would remain alive" (Hirschfield

56). However, with this trust there should also be the understanding that the translator will remain faithful to the meaning when translating the text. Although translators might not achieve exact, literal equivalence in the rendering of texts, the translation should maintain as much of the meaning of the original text as possible.

Another important concern translators must also consider is the differences between the cultures of the source language and the target language. As Korzeniowska states, "It is the writers' whole cultural and social background that is brought forward in their texts, a background that has its own sounds, feelings, nuances and, maybe most important of all, history" (67). Translators should not, in seeking to be faithful to the work, ignore a writer's individual background in order to make the work fit in with the dominant cultural values of the translator's culture. When translators ignore these issues, they usurp the role of the author. It is the translator's responsibility to use "intellect and aesthetic values in order to produce translated texts that will primarily render what the author of the original wanted to transmit to the reader" (Korzeniowska 125).

For example in her essay "Kochinnenako in Academe: Three Approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale" (1986), Paula Gunn Allen discusses John M. Gunn's translation of a traditional Konchinnenako oral tale. In her discussion she illustrates that translations are never "innocent," that they will regularly be influenced by the translator's cultural biases.

> Those who translate or "render" narratives make certain crucial changes, many unconscious. The cultural bias of a translator inevitably shapes his or her perceptions of the materials being translated, often in ways that he or she is unaware of. Culture is fundamentally a shaper of perception,

after all, and perception is shaped by culture in many subtle ways. (Allen 2110–11)

According to Allen, when John Gunn renders the "Yellow Woman" tales into English, he uses "European, classist, conflict-centered patriarchal assumptions as plotting devices" (2111). The oral tradition is "in continuous flux, which enables it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people's lives" (2110). Because of this, Gunn's English renderings "dislocate the significance of the tale and subtly alter the ideational context of woman-centered, largely pacifist people" (2111). Gunn has altered the tale in order for it to fit into the male-centered cultural values of western society.

I also discuss these issues in my essay "Translating the Queer Voice: Problems with Polish Translations of Ginsberg's 'America' and 'Message.'" In this essay I contrast Polish translations of Allen Ginsberg's poetry from three different translators. I first look at a translation of "Message" from 1979 by Tadeusz Rybowski. A particular problem of Rybowski's translation appears in line six of the poem, which reads: "but you are gone in NY." Rybowski has translated the line as: "ale ty pojechałaś do Nowego Jorku." To read Ginsberg with respect to his gay life, which his poetry often intentionally reflects, would be to read the "you" of "Message" as referring to a man. The problem in Rybowski's translation of these lines is in the conjugation of "pojechać" [to go (by a form of transportation)]. Rybowski has declined the verb as the feminine "pojechałaś" [you (female) went]. If Rybowski had translated the referent as masculine, the verb would have ended in "eś," but here it ends in "aś." Whether this was done intentionally or not, Rybowski's translation obliterates the potential that Ginsberg was referring to a man, erasing any reference to Ginsberg's homosexuality.

I go on to argue that Rybowski was most likely influenced not only by the Catholic church, which still wields a great amount of influence in Poland, but also by the Polish Communist Party, which followed a strict anti-gay program. The influence of the Church and the Party also helps to explain how the lines, "America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies" (27), and "America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die" (59) were not merely mistranslated but completely left out of Rybowski's translation. It was also at this time that the labor union Solidarność was beginning to be a thorn in the side of the Party. Only two years after Rybowski translated the poem the Party declared martial law, at the same time making Solidarność an illegal union. By excluding the line about the Wobblies, Rybowski avoids any possible criticism that he might have been supporting Solidarność. At first look it also seems strange that Rybowski does not mention Sacco and Vanzetti. At the time of their trial in the 1920s the international Left condemned the case both within and beyond the borders of the U.S. Leftists and Internationalists saw it as another example of the U.S. persecution of Communism. If Rybowski had included this line one would think it a perfect way of supporting Soviet ideology. However, one must remember that Sacco and Vanzetti were not Communists, but Anarchists. In 1979 the Party in Poland was trying to silence all dissenting voices. If Rybowski had included a reference to Anarchists, the Communist authorities could have seen it as subverting the idea of a strictly centralized government.

Ultimately, whether translators come to the source text as "penitents" or as "poets," they will have to make certain choices; choices about tone, meaning and even content. When translating *Prawiek i inne czasy* [*Longago and Other Times*], I was also often forced to make decisions about all of these considerations.

The first challenge I was faced with was the very title of the novel. The literal translation of "prawiek" is "time immemorial" (Fisiak 738), or "a long time ago." Because the title is also the name of the village where the novel takes place, my first thought was simply to keep it as "Praviek," only changing the "w" to a "v" in order to maintain the Polish pronunciation. However, throughout the novel, Tokarczuk constantly plays with the concept of time. She uses it not only temporally but spatially as well. In the opening chapter, for example, she describes the area of Longago in terms of time instead of space. The chapters themselves are called "times." In the novel, the word "prawiek" is not only a time it is also a place. It is both an area and a village in that area in southern Poland. In Poland, this word would not necessarily be a peculiar name for a village. Throughout Poland, one can find place names like "Dobre" [Good], "Wola" [Will], "Kościelna Wieś" [Church Village], and "Białe Błota" [White Muds]. My goal then was to render "prawiek" into a plausible place name, while not losing its meaning as a time. Whereas "Long ago" would have reflected standard English usage, I believe that by making the simple lexical unit "Longago," I remained more faithful to the original since the Polish word is made up of two parts: "pra," meaning "before;" and "wiek" meaning "age" or "century."

An interesting element of Polish grammar lies in the way the Polish language creates adjectival phrases. When an English sentence must use a relative clause, the equivalent Polish sentence can generally omit it. The following sentence is a good example: "Między innymi rzezczami leżał tu schowany przed dziećmi nóż sprężynowy" (59). The literal translation of this sentence would be, "Among the other things lay here a hidden from children switchblade." In the Polish, the verb "schować" [to hide] becomes a past participle "schowany" [hidden]. It is treated as an adjective as the "y" at the end

shows it to be a masculine, singular adjective in the nominative case. However, the entire phrase "hidden from children" is actually the full adjectival phrase. In my translation, I rendered this sentence as, "Among the other things lay a switchblade that had been hidden from children" (63). In order for the sentence to fit English structure I had to create a relative clause beginning with "that." In my rendering, the meaning of the passage is transmitted, though the form has changed. What remains problematic in either example is the effect of leaving the noun that is being modified until the end of the adjective phrase. In the Polish, the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to read "switchblade," which creates a moment of tension that cannot be transmitted into the English. An even more complicated example of this comes a page earlier: "Był stary termometr ze stłuczoną w środku rureczką na rtęć" (58). The literal rendering of this sentence would be, "There was an old thermometer with a broken in the middle tube with mercury." Again, the verb "stłuc" [to break] is in the form of the past participle "stłuczona" [broken]. As it ends with "ą," it is a singular, feminine adjective in the instrumental case. In order to keep the flow of the passage, I decided to take part of the sentence and join it to the following sentence: "There was also an old thermometer. The small glass tube inside it was broken so that the mercury was able to wander about the thermometer unhindered by any scale, independent of the temperature" (62). Once again, despite the change of form, I have transmitted the meaning.

Another interesting obstacle I faced while translating was the rendering of "Dogsons" and "Catbergs" in the story of the character Florentynka. The old woman Florentynka has slowly been going insane. In the process, she has surrounded herself with dozens of cats and dogs. We then read that "she never talked about them as 'dogs' or 'cats,' because that sounded like she was talking about things. Instead, she would say

'Dogsons' and 'Catsbergs'" (58). In the original Polish, Tokarczuk writes "Psowie" and "Kotowie." These are completely made up forms of the nouns. In Polish, when a surname ends in a consonant, the plural nominative form will end in "-owie." Tokarczuk gives the example of "Malakowie," which I render simply as "Malaks." In order to transmit the significance of this passage, it would not have been enough for me to translate it simply as "Dogs" and "Cats" since Florentynka addresses them as humans and even treats them as equals with humans. I then hit upon the idea of "Dogsons" and "Catbergs." Although these forms are not full equivalent translations, I believe that I was able to transmit both the meaning and tone of the passage.

Perhaps the most difficult decision I was forced to make was in deciding how to render the Russian phrases from the novel. There are a few instances when Russian characters speak. Instead of using Polish, Tokarczuk keeps the Russian, using the Polish transcription system. My first choice was to leave the Russian but change it to an English based transcription. My thought was that this would have been closer to the experience of a Polish reader of the novel. However, I realized that, because of the close relation between Polish and Russian, it would not be nearly as difficult for a Polish reader to understand the Russian as it would be for an English speaker. Therefore, I translated the Russian phrases into English, but left them in italics, as in the original. I also added to the dialogue to make it clear to the reader that the characters were speaking Russian. For example on page 16 there is the following conversation between Michal and two Russian soldiers:

"*Who are you*?" they asked in Russian.

"*I am called Michail Juzefovich Nyebyesky,*" answered Michal, also in Russian.

"*We have orders for you.*"

Although this does change the effect somewhat, I feel that it stays true to the meaning and, perhaps just as important, it remains readable for an English audience.

As I discussed earlier, an important part of translating is the culture of the source language. Unfortunately, there are always certain cultural references whose significance is impossible to transmit. Without knowing about the source language's culture, a target language reader will not be able to understand the full importance of certain references. In translating *Longago*, I came across two such references to Polish culture.

The first appears with the mention of the "Jędrusi" [Jedrushes] on page 147. The Jędrusi were a partisan group who fought for the Polish underground during the German occupation of World War II. The only possible way I could have given this information would have been in the form of a footnote. However, my feeling was that a footnote in a work of fiction that was not a critical edition would have worked against the flow of the reading. What is more, the passage in which the Jedrushes are mentioned does create some context in which the word can be understood: "The younger one's husband had joined the Home Army. The older one's husband had joined the Jedrushes." Because the Home Army, the AK [Armia Krajowa] in Polish, was also a group in the underground, which many people outside of Poland have heard of, there is a context for the understanding of "Jedrush."

The second reference to Polish culture, whose full significance I could not transmit, appears in the chapter "The Time of Popielski's Grandchildren." When the children go to the forest on Saint John's night, they go to look for the "kwiat paproci" [fern blossom]. The tradition is based on the legend of the "fern blossom," which only blooms on Saint John's night, the summer solstice, the shortest night of the year. It "may be found only in this (shortest) night. According to legend, whoever finds this mysterious

fern will soon find great treasures" (Urban-Klaehn). Again, the only possible method of communicating this reference would have been through a footnote, and again, I did not feel that it would have fit well into structure of the translation. I do believe that much of the meaning is transmitted to the reader. At the end of the passage, the reader understands the magical nature of the "fern blossom" as it transforms from an empty can into a flower. Also, in the passage, the character Kloska decides to avoid it as "she was already too old to make any wishes, and she knew how many problems can come about with the fern blossom" (231).

Perhaps the most interesting challenge I faced while translating is found in the chapter "The Time of Izydor," beginning on page 203. In the chapter, the character Izydor has several revelations about the nature of God. First, he realizes that God is a woman. For a time, he is comfortable with this. However, he has another revelation that God is neither man nor woman, but both, and that this is revealed in the word "Boże." This is the vocative form for the word "Bóg" [God], a masculine noun. The literal translation would be "Oh, God." However, as a noun in the nominative case, "Boże" would be a neuter gender noun. As a neuter noun, God would be neither man nor woman. This idea is of course utterly impossible to render into a language, such as English, that does not have a neuter gender for nouns. What is more, Izydor's revelation also relies on the fact that "'Boże' brzmiało tak samo jak 'słońce" ["'God' sounded like 'sun'"] (208). Obviously, in English "God" does not sound at all like "sun." However, the Polish words for "Oh, God" and "sun" do sound similar. What is more, "Boże" and "słońce" are neuter nouns, as are the other words in the passage. Unfortunately, there is no way to render completely the effect of this passage. I decided to translate the passage as follows: "In Polish, 'God' sounded like 'sun,'" adding the "In Polish." Although I

have added to the original, I feel that my choice does transmit at least part of the meaning of the passage. What is lost is the idea of "God" being a neuter noun.

Before translating *Longago and Other Times*, I made the conscious decision to come to the text as the "poet" rather than as the "penitent." When translators take up a work of literature, they must recognize that the exact equivalence that might be possible in pragmatic translation is not only nearly impossible, but often undesirable. While translators must pay attention to the culture of the source language, as in ethnographic translation, they must also accept that certain cultural references will not be available to readers of the target language. They should not let the flow or tone of the translation suffer in order to transmit the information necessary for an understanding of these references. Whereas linguistic translation is mostly concerned with the structure of a source text, which is quite often an important part of the narrative, the translator must render the work readable for the target audience. The aesthetic translator, the poet, must translate as all of these and yet as none of them. As Caryl Emerson says, the translation is a "release of potential," a new work and yet the same work as the original. With this in mind, the aesthetic translator can better render the malleable unity of a text.

The Time of Longago

Longago is a place in the very center of the Universe.

To walk through Longago quickly, from north to south takes an hour. It takes just as long from east to west. If someone wanted to walk around Longago slowly, carefully examining everything, it would take an entire day, from morning to evening.

On Longago's northern border lies the road from Taszov to Kielce. It is a busy and dangerous road. Travelers are always afraid when they take it. The archangel Raphael watches over this border.

On the southern border sits the village of Jeszkotle, with a church, an alms house, and small stone houses around a dirt market square. The village is a menacing place because it creates a desire to own and to be owned. The archangel Gabriel guards this side of Longago.

From south to north, from Jeszkotle to the Kielce road runs the Highway, and Longago lies along it.

On Longago's western border lie damp meadows by the riverside, some wooded areas, and a palace. Next to the palace is the horse stable. One horse costs more than all of Longago. The horses belong to the local baron, and the meadows belong to the rector. The danger of the western border is the sin of pride. The archangel Michael guards this border.

On Longago's eastern border runs the White River, separating Longago from Taszov. The White turns towards the mill, the border running with it, between fields and birch bushes. Stupidity, arising from the desire to be sarcastic, is the danger on this side of the river. The archangel Uriel guards this border.

God placed a mountain in the middle of Longago. Every summer swarms of beetles congregate on it. This is why people have named it "Beetle Mountain." After all, it is God's job to create, and people's job to name.

From the northwest the Black River flows south, joining the White at the Mill. The Black is deep and dark. It runs through the forest, reflecting the overgrowth of the forest's face. Dry leaves sail down the Black, and inattentive bugs fight for their lives in its depths. The Black struggles with the roots of trees, washing away the forest. Sometimes, whirlpools appear on its dark surface because the river can be angry and wild. Every year, in late spring, the Black floods the priest's fields and bathes itself there in the sun. This allows the frogs to multiply by the thousands. The priest fights with it all summer, and every year, at the end of July, it mercifully gives in, returning to its current.

The White is flat and brisk. It flows along a wide sandy riverbed and hides nothing. The water is clean and the sun reflects off its clear, sandy bottom. It resembles a giant shining lizard. It whizzes between the poplars, making frolicking turns. It is difficult to foresee the pranks it plays. One year it might make an island from a cluster of birches, and then, over the decades, move far away from the trees. The White flows through the woods, meadows and fields with a golden, sandy sparkle.

The rivers meet at the mill. At first they flow beside each other uncertain, shy, longing for intimacy, then they fall into each other, losing themselves. The river that flows on from their meeting is then neither the White nor the Black. It becomes powerful, and it easily propels the mill wheel that grinds the grain for bread.

Longago lies along both rivers, as well as along the third river that is created by their mutual desire. The river that arises at the mill from the combination of the White and Black is called the River, and it flows farther on, peacefully and fulfilled.

The Time of Genovefa

In the summer of 1914, two Czarist soldiers in bright uniforms came on horseback for Michal. He saw them riding from the direction of Jeszkotle. The sweltering air carried their laughter. Michal waited at the door in his flour-whitened apron, even though he knew what they wanted.

"*Who are you*?" they asked in Russian.

"*I am called Michail Juzefovich Nyebyesky,*" answered Michal, also in Russian.

"*We have orders for you.*"

He took some documents from them and gave them to his wife. She cried all day as she prepared Michal for war. She was weak and heavy from crying, and could not even cross the doorway to watch her husband ride to the bridge.

When the flowers dropped off the potato plants, and small green fruits appeared in the Earth, Genovefa realized she was pregnant. She ticked the months off on her fingers, and counted to the first hay bailing at the end of May. It would happen then. Now she despaired that she had not been able to tell Michal. Maybe her growing belly was a sign that he would return, that he had to return. Genovefa ran the mill alone, just as Michal had done. She supervised the workers and filled out the receipts of the peasants who brought in the grain. She listened for the murmur of the water moving the mill wheel and the rumble of the machines. So much flour would settle in her hair and eyelashes that, in the evening, standing in front of the mirror, she would see an old woman looking back.

The old woman would undress, and then examine her belly. She would lay in bed, but despite the pillows and woolen socks, she could not get warm. Because people enter dreams the way they enter water, with their feet, she would not be able to fall asleep for a long time. So she had a lot of time for prayer. She began with "Our Father," and then "Hail Mary," and finally her favorite prayer, a drowsy prayer to her guardian angel. She asked it to watch over Michal, because maybe in war a person needs more than one guardian angel. Then her prayer would change into a picture of war. It was simple and poor, because Genovefa knew no other world except Longago, and she knew no other war except the small Saturday battles at the market, when the drunken men from Szlom would come into town. They would tear at each other's coats, fall on the ground, and fight in the mud, becoming smeared, dirty, and pathetic. Genovefa imagined war as a fistfight in the mud and garbage, a fight where everything is decided right away, at one go. So she was surprised that the war was taking so long.

Sometimes, when she would go to the town to shop, she would overhear people's conversations.

"The Czar is stronger than the German," they said.

Or:

"The war will end on Christmas."

But it did not end on that Christmas, or on any of the next four.

Before the first holidays, Genovefa went shopping in Jeszkotle. As she was crossing the bridge she saw a girl walking along the riverbank. She was barefoot and poorly dressed. Her naked feet sank boldly into the snow, leaving deep, small tracks. Genovefa shuddered and stopped. She looked down at the girl and found a kopeck in her purse. The girl lifted her gaze and their eyes met. The coin fell into the snow. The girl

laughed, but there was neither thanks nor sympathy in her laughter. She showed her big white teeth, and her green eyes flashed.

"That's for you," said Genovefa.

The girl squatted down, delicately picked the coin from the snow, turned, and walked on without a word.

Jeszkotle looked as though it had lost its color. Everything was black, white, and gray. Small groups of men were standing in the market. They were debating the war. Cities destroyed, the inhabitant's homes collapsing in the streets. People running from bullets. Brother searching for brother. No one could tell who was worse, Russian or German. The Germans were using a gas that made your eyes burst. Famine will be the crop before the harvest. War is the first plague, after which the rest follow.

Genovefa skirted the piles of horse manure that were melting the snow in front of the Szenbert store. On the piece of plywood nailed to the door was written:

C H E M I S T'S

Szenbert & Co.

carrying only first rate quality

Laundry soap

Fabric dye

Wheat and rice starch

Oil, candles, matches

Insect powder

She felt weak when she read the words "insect powder." She thought about the gas the Germans were using that made the eyes explode. Did cockroaches feel the same when

they were doused with Szenbert's powder? She had to take a few deep breaths to keep from vomiting.

"Can I help you, miss?" asked a young woman in a musical voice. She was also pregnant, and smiled when she saw Genovefa's belly.

Genovefa asked for kerosene, matches, soap and a new scrubbing brush. She ran her fingers across the sharp bristles.

"I'm going to clean the house for the holidays. I'll wash the floors, the curtains, the oven."

"We'll be having our holiday soon too. Chanukah. You're from Longago, aren't you? From the mill? I know you."

"Now we both know each other. When are you due?"

"In February."

"I'm due in February too."

Mrs. Szenbert began laying out the bars of gray soap on the counter.

"Have you ever wondered how we can be so stupid as to give birth in the middle of a war?"

"God, probably."

"God, God. It's a good way to keep track of accounts, keeping the 'credit' and 'debit' spaces even. There has to be a balance. Something is lost, something is gained. You're probably expecting a son. So pretty."

Genovefa picked up the basket.

"I should have a daughter, my husband being at war, a boy without a father grows up badly."

Mrs. Szenbert came from behind the counter and showed Genovefa to the door.

"All of us should have daughters. If we all began having only daughters there would finally be peace in the world."

They both laughed.

The Time of Misha's Angel

The angel saw Misha's birth completely differently than the midwife, Mrs. Kucmerka saw it. Angels see everything differently. They do not perceive the world through physical forms, where the world continually blooms and is then destroyed, but through their meaning and spirit.

The angel that God had assigned to Misha saw a pained, clenched body, shaking in its being like a rag. It was Genovefa's body giving birth to Misha. And the angel saw Misha as a fresh, bright, empty expanse, in which a stunned, half-conscious soul would soon appear. When the child opened its eyes, the angel thanked the Most High. Then the angel's gaze and the person's gaze met for the first time. And the angel trembled, as much as an angel can tremble, having no body.

The angel admitted Misha into the world behind the midwife's back. It cleaned out a space for her in life. It showed her to different angels and to the Most High, and its ethereal lips whispered: "Look, look, this is my ward." A unique, angelic tenderness, a loving compassion filled it. This is the one emotion an angel can feel. The creator did not give them instincts, feelings, nor needs. If they had them, they would not be metaphysical beings. The one instinct angels have is compassion. The one feeling they have is a boundless compassion, as heavy as the heavens.

The angel saw Mrs. Kucmerka wash the child with warm water, then dry her with a soft flannel. Then it looked into Genovefa's eyes, reddened by the effort.

It observed the event as though it were flowing water. It was not interested in the event itself, because it knew from where it had flowed and to where it was flowing, it knew its beginning and end. It could see the current of similar events, and of events that were not so similar, events close to this one in time, and events more distant in time, events resulting one from another, and events taking place completely independent of others. But this also held no meaning for it.

For an angel, events are kinds of dreams or films that have neither beginnings nor endings. Angels are unable to become involved in them, they are completely unnecessary for them. People learn from the world, they learn from experiences, they learn knowledge about the world and about themselves, they are reflected in events, they determine their own borders, possibilities, they give themselves names. An angel does not have to derive anything from the outside, but it experiences through itself, all the knowledge about the world and itself is contained within itself. This is how God created it.

An angel does not have the kind of reason that people have, it does not make conclusions, it does not judge. It does not think logically. Some people seem rather stupid to angels. But from the beginning, angels have carried the fruit of the tree of knowledge within themselves, a clear knowledge that enriches one simple feeling, a resigned intellect of reasoning, and with it mistakes and fears, and a mind without prejudice that comes from false perceptions. But, like all other things created by God, angels are mutable. This is why Misha's angel was so often not with her when she needed it most.

Misha's angel, when it was not there, would turn its gaze from the terrestrial world and look at other angels and other worlds, higher and lower, that were attached to

each thing on the Earth, every animal and every plant. It saw a vast ladder of beings, an unusual structure containing the Eight Worlds, and it saw the Creator involved in creation. But it would be a mistake to think that Misha's angel was watching the Lord's face. The angel could see more than people, but not everything.

Turning its thoughts to other worlds, the angel had to make an effort to concentrate its attention on Misha's world, which was similar to worlds of different people and animals. It was dark and full of suffering like a murky lake overgrown with duckweed.

The Time of Kloska

The barefooted girl whom Genovefa had given a kopeck to was Kloska.

Kloska appeared in Longago in either July or August. She would collect the leftover stocks of grain from the fields and bake them over a fire. In the autumn, she would steal potatoes, and when the fields were deserted in November, she would hang about the inn. Sometimes, someone would buy her vodka. Sometimes, she would get a piece of bread with a slice of pork fat. People, however, are unwilling to give something for nothing, for free, especially in an inn, so Kloska began whoring herself. Tipsy and warmed with vodka, she would go outside with men and give herself to them for a tether of kielbasas. Since she was the only young woman in the area who was so easy, the men hovered about her like dogs.

Kloska was big and robust. She had light hair and a pale complexion that was brighter than the sun's. She would always look at people straight in the face with insolence, even the priest. She had green eyes, one of which slightly wandered off to the

side. The men who took Kloska behind the bushes always ended up feeling uneasy afterwards. They would button up their trousers and return to the stuffy air of the inn with reddened faces. Kloska never liked being the one on the bottom. She would say:

"Why should I lie under you? I'm no less than you."

She preferred leaning against a tree or the wooden side of the inn, throwing her skirts over her back, her ass shining in the darkness like the moon.

This is how Kloska learned about the world.

There are two ways of learning, from the outside and from the inside. We think the first is the best or even the only way. So people learn through long journeys, watching, reading, universities, lectures. They learn thanks to what happens outside of them. A person is a stupid creature that must learn. So it pastes knowledge to itself like a bee collecting pollen. The more knowledge people get, the more they use. But that thing inside which is "stupid" and needs learning never changes.

Kloska learned by absorbing from the outside in.

Knowledge that only grows around people does not change anything in them. It might seemingly change them on the outside, just as clothes are exchanged for others. But those who absorb what they learn, experience continuous transformations, because they incorporate what they learn into their own being.

So Kloska, through absorbing into herself the dirty, stinking peasants of Longago and the surrounding area, became them, she became drunk like them, scared by the war like them, excited like them. What was more, by taking them inside her in the bushes behind the inn, Kloska absorbed their wives, their children, and their stinking, stuffy wood shacks around Beetle Mountain. In a way, she took the entire village into herself, and every pain of the village, and every hope.

That was Kloska's university. Her diploma became her growing belly.

The Barroness Popielska found out about Kloska's condition. She ordered that she be brought to the palace. She looked at Kloska's large belly.

"You're going to give birth any day. How do you think you'll survive? I'll teach you how to sew and cook. You'll even get to work in the laundry. Who knows, if everything shapes up well, you'll even get to keep the child."

However, when the Barroness Popielska saw the girl's strange, insolent gaze, which dared look over the paintings, furniture and upholstery, she hesitated. She changed her tone when Kloska's eyes moved over the innocent faces of the Barroness's sons and daughters.

"It is our duty to help our neighbors who are in need. But our neighbors must want help. I concern myself with this kind of help. I maintain the alms house in Jeszkotle. You may give your baby to them. It is clean and very nice there."

The words "alms house" caught Kloska's attention. She looked at the aristocrat. The Barroness Popielska gathered up her confidence.

"I give out clothing and food to the needy. People don't want you here. You carry disorder and easy morals with you. You live terribly. You should leave from here."

"And am I not free to be where I like?"

"Everything here is mine. This is my land and my forests."

Kloska bared her white teeth in a wide grin.

"Everything's yours? You poor, thin, little bitch."

The Barroness's face froze.

"Get out," she said calmly.

Kloska turned around and walked out, her bare feet smacking along the floor.

"You whore," said Mrs. Franiova, the palace maid, and hit Kloska in the face. Franiova's husband had gone crazy over Kloska the summer before.

As Kloska staggered past the gravel drive, the carpenters on the roof began whistling at her. She stopped, pulled up her skirt, and pointed her ass at them.

At the park, she stopped and wondered for a moment where she should go.

To the right she had Jeszkotle, to the left, the forest. The forest pulled her to itself. The moment she was among the trees she sensed that everything smelled different, stronger, clearer. She began walking to an abandoned shack where she had sometimes stayed the night. The house was a remnant of some burned down settlement. Now the forest had overgrown it. Kloska's legs, swollen from the heat and the burden she carried, could not feel the hard pinecones. At the river she felt a pain, foreign to her body, begin to spread. Panic was slowly overtaking her. Terrified, she began thinking, "I'm going to die now, because I have no one to help me." She stood in the middle of the Black River, not wanting to take a single step farther. The cold water washed around her legs and belly. From the water she saw a hare quickly dart under a fern. She envied it. She saw a fish swimming around the roots of a tree. She envied it. She saw a lizard crawl under a stone. She envied it as well. She felt the pain again. This time it came on stronger, more terrifyingly. "I'll die," she thought, "now I'll just die. I'm giving birth and no one will help me." She wanted to lay herself down in the ferns alongside the river, because she needed the coolness and the dark. But despite her entire body, she walked on. The pain came back again, and Kloska realized that she did not have much time.

The dilapidated house on Blowing Hill consisted of four walls and a piece of the roof. The inside lay in ruins, overgrown with nettles and smelling of dampness. Slugs

crawled blindly along the walls. Kloska picked some large burdock leaves and made a bed with them. The pain continued returning in faster and faster waves. When it became too much to bear, Kloska understood that she had to do something, to push it out of her, to throw it out onto the nettles and burdock leaves. She clenched her teeth and started to push. "The pain will leave the same way it came in," she thought to herself, sitting on the ground. She lifted her skirt. She did not see anything exceptional, only the wall of her belly and thighs. Her body was still tightly closed. Kloska tried to look inside herself, but her belly got in the way. With her hands shaking from the pain, she tried to grope for the place where the child would come out. With her fingertips, she felt the swollen vulva, the coarse hair of the womb, but her crotch could not feel the touch of her fingers. Kloska touched herself like something alien, like a thing.

The pain increased, knocking her senseless. Her thoughts became torn like old fabric. Words and ideas fell apart, vanishing into the Earth. Her body, swollen by the birth, took control now, and because the human body lives through images, they flooded over the half conscious Kloska.

It seemed to Kloska that she was giving birth in a church, on a cold floor, in front of a painting. She could hear the soothing hum of the organs. Then it seemed that she was the organ that she was playing, that within her she had many sounds, that if she had wanted she could have let all of them out at once. She felt powerful and mighty. Then, suddenly, a mere fly thwarted her power, the ordinary buzz of a large purple fly, right at her ear. The pain struck Kloska with a renewed strength. "I'll die, I'll die," she moaned. After a moment she moaned again. "I won't die, I won't die." The sweat glued her eyelids together and stung her eyes. She began to sob. She propped herself up on her arms and began pushing desperately. After the effort she felt a sudden relief. Something

had jumped out of her, splashing. Kloska was open now. She dove into the burdock leaves, looking for the baby, but there was nothing there except water. So Kloska gathered her strength and began pushing again. She clenched her eyes and pushed. She took a deep breath and pushed. She cried and looked up. Between the rotting shingles she could see the cloudless sky. She saw her child there. It lifted itself up uncertainly, and stood on its legs. It looked down at her like no one had ever looked at her before, with a great, inexpressible love. It was a boy. He picked a twig off the ground and it changed into a small garter snake. Kloska was happy. She lay on the leaves and fell into a dark well. Her thoughts returned, calmly, gracefully swimming through her mind. "So the house has a well. So the well has water. I'll live in the well. It's cool and damp here. Children play in wells, and slugs regain their sight here, and crops grow. I'll have something to feed my child with. Where is my child?"

She opened her eyes, terrified that time had stopped, that there was no child.

The pain returned again and Kloska began screaming. She screamed so loud the walls of the shack began trembling, birds were frightened away, and people raking hay in the fields lifted their heads, crossing themselves. Kloska coughed, and swallowed her screams. Now she screamed on the inside, within herself. Her scream was so powerful her belly moved. Kloska could feel something between her legs, something new and alien. She lifted herself up on her arms and looked into the face of her child. The child's eyes were clenched in pain. Kloska pushed once again and the child was born. Shaking from the effort, she tried to take it into her arms, but her hands could not find their way within the vision her eyes were seeing. In spite of this she breathed a sigh of relief, and slowly slid down into the darkness somewhere.

When she awoke, she saw the child beside her, shrunken and dead. She tried holding the baby to her breast. Her breast, painfully swollen, was bigger than the baby. Flies were circling above her.

Through the entire afternoon Kloska tried to get the dead baby to suckle. The pain returned towards evening, and Kloska pushed out the afterbirth. Then she fell asleep again. In her dream she was feeding the child, not with milk, but with water from the Black River. The child was a phantom that sucked the life out of people while sitting on their chests. It wanted blood. Kloska's dream became even more disturbing and difficult, but she could not wake from it. A woman appeared, as big as a tree. Kloska could see her distinctly, every detail of her face, her hair, her clothes. She had curly black hair, like a Jew, and a wonderfully expressive face. She looked beautiful to Kloska. She desired her with her entire body, but it was not the kind of desire she knew, from the bottom of her stomach, from between her legs. Instead, it flowed from somewhere inside her body, from a place above the stomach, near the heart. The powerful woman bent over Kloska and stroked her cheek. Up close, Kloska looked into her eyes and saw something that until then she had neither ever known nor had even thought of. "You are mine," said the giant woman, and rubbed Kloska's neck and enlarged breasts. The places where the woman touched her, Kloska's flesh became blissful and immortal. Kloska gave herself over completely to that touch. Then the woman took Kloska into her arms and embraced her. With her cracked lips, Kloska found a breast. It smelled like animal fur, chamomile, and rue. Kloska drank and drank.

In her dream she heard thunder, and suddenly she saw that she was still lying in the shack atop the pile of burdock leaves. It was gray all around. She could not tell whether it was dawn or dusk. Again lightning struck somewhere close by, and within

seconds the sky opened in a rainstorm that drowned out the next clap of thunder. The water poured through the leaking roof and washed the blood and sweat from Kloska, cooling her feverish body, feeding it like a suckling baby. Kloska drank the water straight from the sky.

Once the sun had set, she crawled out of the shack and began digging a hole, pulling out the tangled roots. The Earth was soft and submissive, as though it wanted to help with the burial. Kloska placed the newborn's body into the uneven hole.

She stroked the ground over the grave for a long time, and when she lifted her eyes to look around, everything was different. It was no longer a world made of objects, or things, or phenomena that existed next to each other. Now, Kloska saw a single mass, one giant animal or person that assumed many forms in order to blossom, die, then come back to life. Everything around Kloska was one body, and her body was a piece of that colossal body, vast, almighty, and unimaginably powerful. In every movement, in every sound, it displayed its power to create something from nothing, and to change that something into nothing.

It made Kloska's head spin, and she leaned against the crumbling wall. Just looking at it made her drunker than any vodka could. It turned her head and awoke laughter within her stomach. Everything seemed to be the way it had been. The pine forest was growing beyond the small green pasture, through which ran the sandy path, its sides overgrown with hazel. A slight breeze stirred the grass and leaves. A grasshopper was playing somewhere, and the flies droned on. Nothing more. And yet, now Kloska saw how the grasshopper was connected to the sky, and what held the hazel by the road. She also saw more. She saw the power that pervaded everything, and she understood its

mechanism. She saw the outline of other worlds and other times spread out over and beneath our own. Now, she also saw things that could not be named with words.

The Time of the Bad Man

Before the war, in Longago's forests, the Bad Man appeared, though someone like him could have been living in the forest forever.

First, in spring, they found Bronek Malak's half decomposed body in the Wodenica forest. Everyone thought he had gone to America. When the police from Taszov arrived, they looked over the area, then took the body away on a cart. They came back to Longago a few more times, but nothing came of it. The murderer was never found. Then someone remarked that they had seen a stranger in the forest. He had been naked and hairy like a monkey. He darted between the trees. Then someone remembered how they had found strange tracks in the forest, a burrow dug in the ground, footprints in the sandy path, discarded animal carcasses. Someone had even heard a howl come from the forest, half human, half animal.

People began talking about where the Bad Man had come from. Before the Bad Man became the Bad Man, he had been an ordinary peasant. He had committed a terrible crime, though exactly what no one knew.

It did not really matter what the crime had been, it gnawed at his conscience, and would not allow him a moment of sleep. He was tormented by his own voice, so he ran from himself until he found solace in the forest. He wandered about the forest until he finally got lost. It seemed to him that the sun was dancing in the sky, which made him lose his bearings. He thought that going north would certainly lead somewhere. But then he began to have doubts about going north, so he started east, believing that the forest

would finally end in the east. But when he started east, again he began to have doubts. He had become insane and insecure about direction. He finally changed his mind and began going south, but on his way he began to doubt once again, and immediately turned west. Then it turned out that he had come back to the place where he had started, in the very middle of the great forest. On the fourth day, he doubted the very direction of the world. On the fifth day, he stopped trusting his own reason. On the sixth day, he forgot where he had come from and why he had come to the forest, and on the seventh day, he forgot his name.

From that moment he became similar to an animal in the forest. He fed off berries and mushrooms, and then began hunting small animals. Each new day erased bigger and bigger fragments from his memory. The Bad Man's mind grew smoother and smoother. He forgot words since he was not using them. He forgot how to pray every evening. He forgot how to start a fire and how to use it, how to fasten the buttons of his coat and how to lace his boots. He forgot all the songs he had known since childhood, and then his entire childhood. He forgot the faces of his friends and family, his mother's, his wife's, his children's, he forgot the taste of cheese, baked meat, potatoes, and potato soup.

This forgetting lasted several years, and in the end the Bad Man was no longer at all similar to the man that had come into the forest. The Bad Man was not himself, and he even forgot what it meant to be oneself. His body began growing thick hair, and his teeth became strong and white from eating raw meat. His throat made hoarse noises and grunts.

One day the Bad Man saw an old man in the forest gathering wood. He felt that the human being was alien to him, and even repugnant, so he ran up to the old man and

killed him. Another time he threw himself on a peasant riding along in a wagon. He killed him and his horse. He devoured the horse, but he did not touch the man. A dead man was even more disgusting than a living one. Then he killed Bronek Malak.

Once the Bad Man accidentally came to the edge of the forest and looked at Longago. The sight of houses aroused a vague feeling of regret and fury. A terrible howl, like a wolf's, was heard in the village. The Bad Man stood at the forest's edge for a moment, then turned and uncertainly crouched, leaning himself on his arms. With surprise, he discovered that this method of walking was much more comfortable, and much quicker. Now that his eyes were closer to the ground he was able to see more precisely. He could catch the smells of the Earth better. The one and only forest was better than all the villages, better than all the roads and bridges, cities and towers. So the Bad Man returned to the forest forever.

The Time of Genovefa

The war had created chaos in the world. The forest in Przyjmy caught fire. The Cossacks shot the Cherubs' son. The men were all gone. There was no one to harvest the fields. There was nothing to eat.

The Baron Popielski of Jeszkotle packed his belongings in a cart and disappeared for a few months. Then returned. The Cossacks plundered his home and cellars. They drank his hundred-year-old wine. Old Boski, who saw it all, said that one of the bottles of wine was so old they had to cut it like a jelly.

Genovefa guarded the mill while it still ran. She got up at dawn and watched over everything. She would check if anyone had come late to work. Then, after everything

had started working in its own rhythmic, noisy way, Genovefa would feel a milk warm tidal wave of relief. It was safe. Then she would return home and prepare breakfast for the sleeping Misha.

In the spring of 1917 the mill stopped. There was nothing to grind. The people had eaten all the grain stores. The familiar noise was missing in Longago. The mill was the engine propelling the world, the machinery that set it in motion. Now, one could only hear the murmur of the River. Its strength was wasted. Genovefa would walk about the empty mill and cry. She would wander around like a ghost, like a tormented white lady. In the evenings she would sit on the steps in front of the house and look at the mill. She dreamed at night. In her dreams the mill was a ship with white sails, like she saw in books. In its wooden body it had large greased pistons that turned round and round. They wheezed and panted. Fire belched out from the inside of the ship. Genovefa desired it. She would wake anxiously from such dreams in a sweat. As soon as it got light outside, she would get up and embroider her tapestry at the table.

During the cholera epidemic of 1918, when the village borders were ploughed, Kloska came to the mill. Genovefa saw her as she walked around the mill, looking in the windows. She looked emaciated. She was thin and seemed very tall. Her light hair had grayed, and she covered her back with a dirty scarf. Her clothes were in tatters.

Genovefa saw her from the kitchen, and when Kloska looked in the window, Genovefa jumped back. She was afraid of Kloska. Everyone was afraid of Kloska. Kloska was crazy, and possibly sick. She spoke nonsensically, she swore. Now, wandering around the mill, she looked like a hungry dog.

Genovefa looked at the picture of Our Lady of Jeszkotle, crossed herself, and went outside.

Kloska turned round and Genovefa began to shudder. That Kloska had such a terrible gaze. "Let me into the mill," she said.

Genovefa went back to the house for the key. She opened the mill door without a word.

Kloska entered the cool shadow in front of Genovefa, immediately got on her knees, and began picking up the scattered pieces of grain, and heaps of dust that had once been flour. With her thin fingers she gathered the grains one at a time, then stuffed them into her mouth.

Genovefa followed her step for step. From above, Kloska's bent form looked like a pile of rags. When Kloska had eaten her fill of grain, she sat on the ground and began crying. Tears flowed down her dirty face. She closed her eyes and smiled. A lump stuck in Genovefa's throat. Where did she live? Did she have any relation? What did she do on Christmas? What did she eat? She could see how fragile her body had become, and she remembered Kloska before the war. She had been a beautiful, robust girl then. Now, Genovefa could see her naked, wounded feet with an animal's strong, claw-like nails. She reached her hand out to touch the gray hair. Kloska opened her eyes and looked squarely into Genovefa's. Not into her eyes so much as straight into her soul, into her very center. Genovefa pulled her hand back. Those were not a person's eyes. She ran outside and with relief saw her house, the hollyhocks, Misha's dress flashing between the gooseberries, the curtains. She took a loaf of bread from the house and went back to the mill.

Kloska emerged from the darkness of the open door with a bundle of grain. She looked at something behind Genovefa, and her face brightened.

"Little precious," she said to Misha, who had walked up to the fence.

"What happened to your child?"

"It died."

Genovefa put her loaf of bread into Kloska's outstretched hands, but Kloska came closer, and, taking the bread, pressed her lips to Genovefa's. Genovefa struggled and jumped back. Kloska laughed. She put the bread into her bundle. Misha began to cry.

"Don't cry precious, your daddy is already coming back to you," murmured Kloska, leaving towards the village.

Genovefa rubbed her mouth with her apron until it was red.

That evening she had trouble going to sleep. Kloska could not have been wrong. She could see the future. Everyone knew about that.

The next day Genovefa began waiting, but not as she had been. Now she waited from hour to hour. She put the potatoes under the quilts so they would not get cold too fast. She made the bed. She poured water into the shaving bowl. She set Michal's clothes out on a chair. She waited as though Michal had gone to Jeszkotle for tobacco and would be returning soon.

She waited like that all summer, autumn and winter. She stopped leaving the house and even going to church. In February the Baron Popielski returned and requested work for the mill. No one knew where he had gotten the grain for grinding. He even lent the peasants grain for sowing. A child was born to the Seraphims', a girl, which everyone took as a sign of the end of the war.

Genovefa had to hire new people for the mill, since the former workers had not returned from the war. The Baron suggested that she hire the man Sunday from Vola as manager. Sunday was fast and reliable. He would bustle about between the upstairs and downstairs, yelling at the peasants. He would keep track of the number of bags that had

been ground on the wall with a piece of chalk. When Genovefa would come to the mill, Sunday would move even faster and yell even louder. He would stroke his paltry little mustache, which was nothing like Michal's thick, curling moustache.

She would go upstairs reluctantly. She took care of only the most necessary matters, mistakes with the grain receipts, machinery breakdowns.

Once, when she was looking for Sunday, she saw some boys carrying sacks. They were bare chested, their torsos were lightly covered in flour, like giant pretzels. The sacks hid their heads so they all looked similar. She could not see in them the young Seraphim or Malak, but rather men. Their naked torsos caught her eye, making her anxious. She had to turn herself around and look somewhere else.

One day, Sunday came with a Jewish boy. The boy was very young. He didn't look older than seventeen. He had dark eyes and black curly hair. Genovefa looked at his mouth. It was big, with beautifully drawn lips, darker than any others she had seen.

"I hired another one," said Sunday, and he told the boy to join the porter.

Genovefa spoke with Sunday absent-mindedly, and when he left she found a pretext to stay. She watched as the boy took off his sweaty shirt, folded it nicely, then hung it over the handrail. She felt moved when she saw his naked chest, slim, but muscular, his swarthy skin, under which blood pulsed and a heart beat. She went back home, but from that moment she would often find a reason to go to the gate where she received the sacks of grain or flour. Or she would go at lunchtime, when the men left to eat. She looked at their backs, covered in flour, their sinewy arms and canvas pants, damp with sweat. Despite herself she would look among them for that one, and when she found him, she felt herself grow warm and her face blush.

That boy, Eli, she heard his name when they called to him, stirred fear, anxiety, and shame in her. When she saw him her heart would begin to pound and she began to breathe faster. She tried to look at him coolly and indifferently. His black, curly hair, strong nose and strange dark mouth. The dark hair under his arms when he would wipe sweat from his face. He swayed as he walked. A few times he met her gaze. He would panic like a small animal when you get too close to it. Finally they ran into each other between the thin doors. She smiled at him.

"Bring me a bag of flour to my house," she said.

From that moment she stopped waiting for her husband.

Eli put the bag of flour on the floor and took off his canvas cap. He crumpled it in his whitened hands. She thanked him, but he did not leave. She saw how he was biting his lips.

"Would you like some compote to drink?"

He nodded his head. She gave him a cup and watched as he drank. He lowered his long, girlish eyelashes.

"I'd like to ask a favor."

"Yes?"

"Come by in the evening and chop some wood for me. Could you?"

He nodded his head and left.

She waited the entire afternoon. She pinned up her hair and looked at herself in the mirror. Then, when he had come, as he was cutting the wood, she brought him some curds and bread. He sat down on the tree trunk and ate. She did not know why, but she began telling him about Michal being at war. He said:

"The war is already over. Everyone is returning."

She gave him a bag of flour. She asked him to come back the next day, and the next day she asked him to come back again.

Eli chopped wood, cleaned the oven, and made some small repairs. They did not speak much, and always over trivial topics. Genovefa stole glances at him, and the longer she looked at him, the more her gaze became attached to him. Finally, she could not stop looking at him. She devoured him with her gaze. At night she dreamed that she was making love to some man and it was neither Michal nor Eli, but someone strange. She awoke with the feeling that she was dirty. She got up, poured water into a bowl, and washed her entire body. She wanted to forget about the dream. Then she looked outside as the workers were going to the mill. She saw Eli furtively looking into her window. She hid behind the curtains. She grew angry with herself that her heart was beating as though she had been running. "I won't think about him, I swear," she decided and went to work. Around noon she would go to Sunday's, always meeting Eli by some chance. She was surprised by her own voice when she asked him to come by.

"I've baked some rolls for you," she said, pointing to the table.

He sat down timidly, laying his cap down. She sat across from him watching as he ate. He ate carefully and slowly. White crumbs stuck to his lips.

"Eli?"

"Yes?" he raised his eyes to her.

"Does it taste all right?"

"Yes."

He stretched his hand out over the table towards her face. She quickly drew back.

"Don't touch me," she said.

The boy dropped his head. His hand returned to his cap. He grew quiet. She sat down again.

"Tell me, where did you want to touch me?" she asked him quietly.

He lifted his head and looked at her. It seemed that she saw a red gleam in his eyes.

"I would touch you here," he said, pointing to a spot on his neck.

Genovefa ran her fingers down her hand down her neck. Beneath her fingers she felt the warm skin and pulsing blood. She closed her eyes.

"And then?"

"Then I would touch your breasts."

She breathed deeply and threw back her head.

"Tell me where exactly."

"There, where they're the most delicate and the warmest. Please, let me."

"No," she said.

Eli jumped to his feet and stood in front of her. She could smell his breath smelling of the sweet roll and milk, like the breath of a child.

"You can't touch me. Swear to your God that you won't."

"Whore," he muttered, throwing his crumpled cap to the ground. The door shook as he left.

Eli came back that night. He knocked gently, and Genovefa knew it was him.

"I forgot my hat," he whispered. "I love you. I swear I won't touch you until you want me to."

They sat on the kitchen floor. The dim light from the dying embers lit their faces.

"I have to be sure whether Michal is still alive. I'm still his wife."

"I'll wait. But tell me how long?"

"I don't know. You can look at me."

"Show me your breasts."

Genovefa slid her night shirt from her shoulders. Her naked breasts and stomach sparkled red. She could hear Eli holding his breath.

"Show me how much you want me," she whispered.

He unfastened his trousers and Genovefa saw his swollen member. She felt the delight from the dream that had been a culmination of endeavors, glances, and rapid breaths. That delight was beyond all control, she was unable to stop it. Now, what appeared was terrifying because there could be nothing more. This had come true, overflowed, ended and began, and the hunger it awoke would be even greater than anytime before.

The Time of the Baron Popielski

The Baron Popielski had lost his faith. He had not stopped believing in God, but God and all the rest were becoming expressionless and flat, like the print in his Bible.

Everything seemed to be fine when the Pelskis came from Kosztov, when he played Whist in the evenings, when he spoke about art, when he looked in on his cellar, and when he pruned his roses. Everything was in order when the smell of lavender came from the closets, when he sat at his oak desk with his pen with the gold clip in his hands, and in the evening when his wife would massage his tired back. But the moment he would leave, when he went somewhere outside his home, even to Jeszkotle, to the muddy market square, or to neighboring villages, it was clear that he was losing his ability to physically resist the world.

He would see the decaying houses, the rotting fences, the cobblestones of the main street grown ragged with time, and he would think: "I was born too late. The world is drawing to an end. It's all but over now." His head hurt. His sight was weakening. It seemed to the baron that it was darker. His feet would get cold. Some indeterminate pain began to seep into his entire body. It was empty and hopeless. There was no help anywhere. He would return to the palace and hide in his study. This kept the world from totally collapsing for at least a little while.

However, the world collapsed anyway. The baron realized this after he returned from his escape from the Cossacks, and looked in his cellars. Everything in it had been destroyed, smashed, hacked apart, burned, trampled, and spilled. He examined the waste, wading in wine up to his ankles.

"Destruction and chaos, destruction and chaos," he whispered.

He lay on a bed in his ransacked house and thought: "From where does evil come into the world? Why does God allow evil? After all, He is good. And then again, maybe God is not good?"

Changes that began taking place in the country became the remedy for the baron's melancholia.

In 1918 there was much to be done, and nothing cures sadness like work. All October, the baron gradually did more and more community work until, by November, his melancholia had completely left him. Now, for a change, he almost never slept, and had no time to eat. He traveled about the country constantly. He visited Cracow and saw it as a princess that has just awakened from sleep. He organized elections for the first Seym. He was founder of several societies, two parties, and the Lower Poland Union of Fishing Lake Owners. In February of the next year, when the first constitution was

passed, the Baron Popielski caught a cold, and once again found himself in his room, in his bed, with his head turned to the window, that is, in the very place from where he had started out.

He returned to health from his bout of pneumonia as though he had returned from a long journey. He read a lot, and began writing a journal. He wanted to talk with someone, but everyone nearby seemed banal and uninteresting to him. So he made himself carry some books from his library to his bed, and ordered new ones by post.

At the beginning of March, he went out on his first walk around the park, and once again saw a dirty, gray world, full of decay and destruction. Independence had not helped. The new constitution had not helped. Along the path in the park he saw a child's red glove appear in the melting snow. He did not know why, but the sight of it drew him deep into his memories. It was a persistent, blind rebirth. A paralysis of life and death. An inhuman engine of life.

The effort of rebuilding everything faded into nothing.

The older the baron grew, the more terrible the world seemed to him. Young people were busy with their own blossoming, with moving forward, and broadening their horizons: from the crib to the walls, the house, the park, the city, the country, the world, and then, in adulthood, comes a time of dreaming about something bigger. Around forty, a breakthrough comes about. Youth, in its intensity, in its strength, grows tired with itself. One night or morning, people come to a boundary. They reach their summit, and take their first steps down, towards death. Then the question appears: "Do I descend proudly, my face turned towards the darkness, or do I turn towards what was, keeping hold of the sham, pretending that it is not darkness, but that only a light has been put out in a room.

The sight of the red glove that had appeared from under the muddy snow convinced the baron that the greatest swindle of youth is all its optimism, the obstinate faith that something will change, improve, that there is progress in everything. This cracked open the bottle of despair that he had always held inside himself like hemlock. The baron looked around and saw all the suffering, death, and decay as common as dirt. He walked about all of Jeszkotle and saw the kosher butcher shop, and the old meat on hooks, and the frozen ribs at Szenbert's, the small funeral procession following a child's coffin, and the low clouds over the houses on the market square, and the gloom that had intruded everywhere and had now captured everything. It resembled a slow, incessant self-immolation, in which people's fortunes and entire lives are thrown into the flames of time.

As he was returning to the palace he passed the church. He went inside, but found nothing there. He saw the painting of Our Lady of Jeszkotle, but there was no God in the church that could have restored the baron's hope.

The Time of Our Lady of Jeszkotle

Our Lady of Jeszkotle, locked in an ornamental frame, had a limited view of the church. She hung to the side of the nave and could neither see the altar nor the entrance from the stoup. A pillar blocked her view of the pulpit. She could only see people one at a time, coming into the church to pray, or when they walked in a line to the altar for communion. During mass she could see the people's profiles, men's and women's, old and young.

Our Lady of Jeszkotle was a pure will that helped the sick and disfigured. She was a force inscribed into the painting by a divine miracle. When people turned their

faces to her, moving their lips, pressing their hands to their stomachs, or folding them over their hearts, Our Lady of Jeszkotle would give them strength and health. She would give it to everyone, without exception, not from mercy, but because that was her nature, to give health to those who needed it. What happened later was up to the people themselves. Some let the strength work into themselves, and it made them well. Then they returned with offerings of miniature figures of the parts of their bodies that had been healed, molded from silver, copper, or even gold, or with beads, and necklaces that adorned the painting.

Others let the strength leak out of them, like water from a punctured bowl, seeping into the Earth. Then they lost their faith in miracles.

It was the same with the Baron Popielski who appeared before the painting of Our Lady of Jeszkotle. She saw him kneel and try to pray. But he could not. So he angrily stood up, and looked at the precious offerings, at the garish colors of the holy painting. Our Lady of Jeszkotle saw that he needed her power for his body and soul. And she gave it to him, soaking him with it, bathing him in it. But the Baron Popielski was as impermeable as a glass ball. So the power washed over him onto the cold church floor, delicately shaking the church.

The Time of Michal

Michal returned in the summer of 1919. That was a miracle, because in a world where war weakened every law, miracles often happen.

It took Michal three months to get home. The place he had set off from was almost on the other side of the Earth, a city on the coast of a strange sea, Vladivostok. He had freed himself from the lord of the east, the king of chaos. But because everything

that exists outside the borders of Longago is blurred and fluid, like a dream, Michal stopped thinking about it as soon as he got to the bridge.

He was sick, emaciated, and dirty. His face was overgrown with black stubble, and a herd of lice was reveling in his hair. His worn out army uniform hung on him as on a stick, and it did not even have a single button. Michal had traded the shiny buttons with the czarist eagle for bread. He had a fever, diarrhea, and the tedious feeling that this world no longer existed. Hope came back to him as he stood on the bridge and saw the Black and White joining in a never ending wedding reception. The rivers remained, the bridge remained, and the heat of the crumbling stones also remained.

From the bridge, Michal could see the mill and the red geraniums in the windows.

A child was playing in front of the mill, a little girl with thick braids. She might have been three or four. Some white chickens were solemnly mincing around her. A woman's hands opened a window. "The worst has happened," thought Michal. The reflection of the sun in the moving window blinded him for a moment. Michal went to the mill.

He slept all day and night, and in his dreams he counted every day of the last five years. His tired, befuddled mind became mixed up, and got lost in a sleeping labyrinth, so he had to begin counting again. While he slept, Genovefa carefully looked over his uniform, stiff from dust. She felt the sweaty collar. She plunged her hands into the pockets that smelled of tobacco. She caressed the buckles on the backpack, but she did not dare open it. Then she hung the uniform on the fence so that everyone going to the mill would be able to see it.

Michal woke the next day at dawn, and observed the sleeping child. He carefully named everything he saw:

"She has brown, thick hair. She has dark eyebrows, a dark complexion, small ears and nose. All children have small noses, hands, plump, childlike, round fingernails."

Then he went to the mirror and looked himself over. He was a stranger to himself.

He walked around the mill, stroking the great stone wheel. He gathered up the floury dust, tasting it on the tip of his tongue. He submerged his hands in the water. He ran his fingers over the fence boards. He smelled the flowers. He moved the chaff cutting wheel. It creaked, and cut off a slice of crumpled nettle.

He went behind the mill into the high grass and peed.

When he returned to the room, he worked up the courage to look at Genovefa. She was not asleep. She was looking at him.

"Michal, no man has touched me."

The Time of Misha

Misha, like all people, was born fragmented, incomplete, in pieces. Everything in her was separate, seeing, hearing, understanding, feeling, and experiencing. Misha's entire future life depended on assembling this into one whole, and then allowing it to collapse.

She needed someone who would stand in front of her, and be a mirror for her, in whom she could see her reflection as an entirety.

Misha's first memory was tied to the sight of a ragged man on the way to the mill. Her father would stagger on his legs. At night, he often cried, his head lying on her mother's breasts. That was why Misha treated him as her equal.

From that moment she felt that there did not exist any truly important difference between an adult and a child. A child and an adult were transitory states. Misha closely observed how she changed, and how everyone around her also changed. She did not know what it was leading to, what the purpose of these changes was. She would make mementos of her own things, and keep them in a cardboard box, first small then bigger, her knitted baby booties, her baby cap that seemed to have been sewn more for a fist than a baby's head, her linen shirt, her first dress. Then she placed her own six-year-old's feet next to the baby booties and sensed the fascinating laws of time.

After her father's return, Misha began to see the world. Before that everything was bleary and indistinct. Before her father's return, Misha could not remember herself, as if she had not even existed. She could remember individual things. At that time, the mill seemed like a gigantic, solid, uniform body, without beginning or end, without top or bottom. Then she saw the mill differently, with her reason. It had sense and form. It was probably the same with other things. At one time, when Misha would think "river," it meant something cold and wet. Now she saw that the river flowed from somewhere and to somewhere, and that same river existed before and after the bridge, and that there were other rivers. Scissors. At one time it was strange, complicated and difficult to use tools that Mama was magically able to operate. After her father sat at the table, Misha saw that scissors were a simple mechanism made from two blades. She made something similar from two flat sticks. Then, for a long time, she tried to see things again has they had been before, but her father had changed the world forever.

The Time of Misha's Coffee Mill

People believe that they live more intensely than animals, more intensely than plants, and especially more intensely than things. Animals sense that they live more intensely than plants and things. Plants dream that they live more intensely than things. But things endure, and that endurance is more of a life than anything else.

Misha's coffee mill sprang into existence from someone's hands that had combined wood, porcelain, and brass into one object. A tree, porcelain, and brass had materialized the idea of milling. Milling a coffee bean so that one could then pour boiling water over it. There is no one who one could say invented the coffee mill, because creation is only the recollection of what exists outside of time, that is, since forever. A person cannot create from nothing. That is a divine skill.

A coffee mill has a belly made of white porcelain, and in the belly there is an opening where a wooden drawer collects the fruit of one's labor. The belly is covered with a brass hat, with a handle ending in a piece of wood. The hat has an enclosed pit where one pours coffee beans.

The coffee mill was created in some factory, and then it found its way to someone's home, where they milled coffee every day before noon. Warm, living hands would hold it. They would hold it to someone's chest where, beneath the cotton or flannel beat a human heart. Then, with its momentum, the war moved it from the shelf in the kitchen into a box with other objects, into bags, and into train carriages where people crowded together in a panicked escape from a violent death. The coffee mill, like anything, absorbed the entire confusion of the world into itself: pictures of shelled trains, sluggish streams of blood, abandoned houses where every year a different wind played with the windows. It absorbed the warmth of people's stagnant bodies, and the despair of

abandoning what was familiar. Hands touched and stroked it with a boundless amount of emotion. The coffee mill seized hold of it, because all matter has the ability to hold the fleeting and transitory.

Michal found it far away in the east, and put it in his backpack like plunder. At night, when they had stopped, he smelled the little drawer. It smelled of safety, coffee, and home.

Misha took the coffee mill with her to the bench outside and turned the handle. It turned loosely, as though it was playing with her. Misha watched the world from the bench, the coffee mill turning, grinding empty space. But then, Genovefa poured a handful of black beans into it, and told Misha to grind them. Then the handle did not turn so easily. The coffee mill choked and slowly, systematically began to work and creak. The game had ended. There was so much solemnity in the work of the coffee mill that no one dared hold it now. It had completely become milling. And then the smell of freshly ground coffee became connected to the coffee mill, Misha, and the entire world.

If you carefully observe objects and things unfolding around them, with closed eyes to keep from being deceived by appearances, if you allow yourself to mistrust what you see, you can, for at least a moment, see their true faces.

Things are an existence submerged in a different reality where there is neither time nor movement. Only their surfaces can be seen. The rest is hidden somewhere else, defining the meaning and sense of every material object, like the coffee mill.

The coffee mill is a piece of matter, into which the idea of grinding was breathed.

Coffee mills grind, and that is why they exist. But no one knows what exactly a coffee mill means. Maybe it is a splinter of some total, fundamental law of change, a law without which this world could not exist, or might have been completely different. Maybe coffee mills are an axis of reality, around which everything turns and opens up. Maybe they are more important for the world than people. And maybe even this one coffee mill of Misha's was a pillar holding up what is called Longago.

The Time of the Parish Priest

The time of year the parish priest hated most was late spring. Around the Feast of Saint John, the Black would insolently flood his pastures.

The priest was, by nature, impulsive, and quite sensitive when it came to his dignity. So when he saw how something so barely concrete and flaccid, so certain and mindless, so elusive and cowardly could take away his pastures, anger would overtake him.

Along with the water shameless frogs would immediately appear, naked and awful. They were constantly climbing onto each other, and mindlessly copulating. A hideous sound would issue from them. The devil must have had that kind of voice, croaking, wet, hoarse from lasciviousness, trembling from constant lust. Besides the frogs, water snakes also appeared in the priest's pastures. They would glide in such a repugnant and writhing motion that the priest immediately felt ill. A shiver of revulsion would shake him and his stomach would tighten spasmodically with the mere thought that such an elongated, slimy body might touch his shoes. The image of a snake fell into his memory and ravaged his dreams. Fish also appeared in the flood waters, and the priest had a better attitude towards them. One could eat fish. So they were good, divine.

The river would overflow into the pastures in the space of three short nights at the most. After the invasion it would rest and reflect the sky in its surface. It would lounge like that for a month. Beneath the water, the lush grass would rot, and if the summer was hot, the smell of decay and rot would drift out over the pastures. Beginning on the Feast of Saint John, the priest would daily go and look at how the river's black water was flooding the flowers of Saint Margaret, the Saint Roch bells, and the Saint Clara herbs. Sometimes it seemed to him that the innocent blue and white heads of the flowers, with water up to their necks, were calling for help. He would hear their high-pitched voices, like the sound of bells during the Ascension. There was nothing he could do for them. His face reddened, and he would clench his fists helplessly.

He prayed. He would begin with Saint John, sanctifying all the water. But it often seemed to the priest while he was praying that Saint John was not listening, that he was busier with leveling the day with the night, with children's bonfires started, with vodka, with throwing garlands into the water, and with the rustling of bushes in the night. He even held a grudge against Saint John, who, every year, regularly allowed the Black to flood his pastures. He was downright offended by Saint John. So he began praying directly to God.

The next year, after the biggest flood ever, God said to the priest: "Build a wall to separate the river from the pasture. Cart in some earth and build a levee that will hold the river in its place." The priest thanked the Lord and began to organize the building of the levee. The next two Sundays he thundered from the pulpit that the river was destroying God's gifts, and called for solidarity in opposition to the elements in the following way: from every township one man would help build the levee two days a week. Men from Longago would work Thursday and Friday, from Jeszkotle, Monday and Tuesday, and

from Kotuszov, Wednesday and Saturday. On the first day, which was appointed to Longago, only two peasants, Malak and Cherub turned up. The angered priest got into his carriage and went around to every cottage in Longago. It turned out that Seraph had a broken finger, the young Florian had been taken to war, a child was being born at the Chlipal's, and Swiatosz had a hernia.

So the priest accomplished nothing. Discouraged, he returned to the parsonage.

That evening, while he prayed, he again asked God for advice. God answered: "Pay them." The priest was confused by the answer. But because the priest's God was sometimes similar to himself, he quickly added: "Give ten groszes at the most, otherwise it won't be worth the effort. All the hay isn't worth more than fifteen zloties."

So, once again, the priest drove his carriage around Longago, and hired a few adult peasants to build the levee. He was able to get Joseph Chlipal, who had just had a son, and Seraph with a broken finger, and two other farmhands.

They only had one wagon, so the work went very slowly. The priest was worried that the spring weather would ruin his plans. He hurried the peasants as much as he could. He even rolled up his cassock, but he had to be careful with his neat leather shoes, so he ran between the peasants, pushing bags, and whipping the horses.

The next day, only Seraph with his broken finger came to work. The angered priest once again drove about the entire village in his carriage, but it turned out that either the workers were either not at home or they were lying in bed, overcome with illness.

That day, the priest hated all the peasants from Longago, being lazy, shiftless, and greedy for money. He fervently tried to excuse himself to the Lord for this feeling so unworthy of a servant of God. He once again asked God for counsel. "Raise their wages," God said to him. "Give them fifteen groszes per day, and even though you

won't have any profits from this year's hay, you'll make up the loss next year." That was smart advice. The work got underway. First they took wagon loads of sand from behind Blowing Hill, then they loaded the sand into burlap sacks and covered the river with them, as though it were injured. Then they filled everything with earth and put hay and grass over that.

The priest observed his work with joy. Now the river was completely separated from the pasture. The river did not see the pasture. The pasture did not see the river.

The river no longer tried to break free of its assigned place. It flowed along, peaceful and meditative, impervious to people's eyes. Along its banks the pastures turned green, and dandelions bloomed.

In the priest's fields the flowers constantly prayed. The Saint Margaret flowers, and the bells of Saint Roch, and the common dandelions all prayed. The bodies of the dandelions became less substantial from the constant praying. They became less yellow, less concrete, until in June when they turned into subtle puffballs. Then God, touched by their piety, sent a warm wind that gathered the dandelions' souls into the sky.

That same warm wind brought rain on the Feast of Saint John. The river swelled centimeter after centimeter. The priest neither slept nor ate. He ran along the river and pastures and over the dyke and watched. He measured the level of the water with a stick, and mumbled curses and prayers beneath his breath. The river paid no attention to him. It flowed along its wide bed, turning in whirlpools, washing away the uncertain banks. On the twenty-seventh of June, the priest's pastures began to get saturated with the water. The priest ran about the new levee with the measuring stick and watched with despair as the water got into cracks, swimming up some unknown path, penetrating beneath the

levee. The next night the waters of the Black destroyed the sandy dyke and poured out over the pastures, as it had every year.

On Sunday, the priest compared the excesses of the river to the work of Satan. That Satan takes over a person's soul daily, hour after hour, like the water. That in this way a person is forced constantly to make the effort of erecting dams. That the tiniest negligence of our daily religious obligations weakens that dam, and that the perseverance of the Tempter is comparable to the perseverance of the water. That sin trickles and flows and drips onto the wings of the soul, and the enormity of evil floods people until they fall into its whirlpools and are dragged to the bottom.

After such a sermon the priest would remain excited for a long time, and would be unable to sleep. He could not sleep from hate of the Black. He told himself that he could not hate a river, a stream of cloudy water. It was not even a plant or an animals, only geography. How was it possible that he, a priest, could feel something so absurd? To hate a river.

And yet it was hate. The hay that had been washed away did not even matter to the priest, only the mindlessness, the dull stubbornness of the Black, its inability to perceive, its egoism, and its boundless obtuseness. When he thought about it, his blood began pulsing hot through his temples, and it flowed quicker through his body. He began to go crazy with anger. He got up and dressed, disregarding the time of night, left the parsonage, and went to the pastures. The cold air sobered him. He laughed to himself and said: "How can you get angry at a river, a common hole in the ground? A river is just a river, nothing more." But when he stood on its bank, it all came back to him. He was overcome with revulsion, disgust, and rage. He would have gladly filled it in with earth,

from the source to the mouth. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, tore off an alder branch, and flogged the shameless body of the river.

The Time of Eli

"Leave. I can't sleep when I see you," Genovefa said to him.

"And I can't live when I don't see you."

She looked at him with gray eyes, and once again felt that she had touched the very center of his soul with her gaze. She put a bucket on the ground and swept aside a strand of hair from her forehead.

"Take the bucket and come to the river with me."

"What will your husband say?"

"He's at the palace."

"What about the workers?"

"You're just helping me."

Eli grabbed the bucket and followed after her along the stony path.

"You've grown into a man," Genovefa said, not turning around.

"Do you think of me when we don't see each other?"

"I think of you when you think of me. Every day. I dream about you."

"God! Why won't this end?" Eli angrily threw down the bucket onto the path. "What sin have I or my fathers committed? Why do I have to suffer like this?"

Genovefa stopped and looked at her feet.

"Eli, don't swear."

They were quiet for a moment. Eli picked up the bucket and they walked further. The path grew wide enough for them to walk next to each other.

"We can't see each other anymore Eli. I'm pregnant. I'm going to give birth in the autumn."

"It should be my child." "Everything has been arranged and made clear."

"We'll run off to the city, to Kielce."

"Everything divides us. You're young, I'm old. You're a Jew, I'm a Pole. You're from Jeszkotle, I'm from Longago. You're free, I'm married. You're moving, I'm standing still."

They went to the wooden pier and Genovefa began taking out the laundry from the bucket. She sank them into the cold water. The dark water rinsed away the bright soap. "You really turned my head," said Eli.

"I know."

She left the laundry, and for the first time leaned her head against his shoulder. He could smell the fragrance of her hair.

"I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you. That kind of love never passes."

"Is that love?"

She did not answer.

"I can see the mill from my windows," said Eli.

The Time of Florentynka

People think that madness is caused by some huge, dramatic event, some kind of agony that cannot be endured. They believe that people are driven mad because of some

reason, a lover leaves them, a loved one dies, they lose their fortune, or they look into the face of God. They also think that people go insane suddenly, immediately, in unusual circumstances, and that madness overcomes people like a trap, shackling their reason, disturbing their emotions.

Florentynka, however, went mad in a completely ordinary way, and, it could be said, for no reason at all. A long time ago, she would have had reasons for going insane, when her husband drowned in the White after getting drunk, when seven of her nine children died, when she miscarried time after time, when she got rid of the ones she had not miscarried, when she nearly died twice while giving birth, when they burned down her barn, when the two children she had left in the world left her and vanished.

Florentynka was now already old. She had her life behind her. She was bone dry and toothless, living alone in a wooden shack by Blowing Hill. From one of the windows of her home she could see the forest, and from the second window she could see the village. Florentynka had two cows that fed her and her two dogs. She had a small orchard full of wormy plums, and in the summer large clumps of hydrangea bloomed.

Florentynka went mad slowly, unnoticeably. First her head hurt and she was unable to sleep at night. The moon bothered her. She told her neighbors that the moon was watching her, that its watchful eye could penetrate the walls and window panes, and that its light was setting traps for her in the mirrors, the windows, and her reflection in the water.

Then, in the evenings, Florentynka began going out in front of her house to wait for the moon. It came out over the pasture, always the same, though in different guises. Florentynka would shake her fist at it. People saw that fist raised to the sky and said, "She's gone mad."

Florentynka's body was petite and thin. After the period of time when she was perpetually giving birth, her belly became round, and now it looked comical, like a loaf of bread hidden beneath a dress. When she stopped giving birth she did not have a single tooth left, keeping with the saying: "One child, one tooth." Something for something. Florentynka's breasts, or rather what time does to a woman's breasts, were long and flat. They clung to her body. Her skin resembled the tissue paper Christmas ornaments are wrapped in after the holidays, and delicate blue veins could be seen through them, a sign that Florentynka was still living.

Those were the times when women died faster than men, mothers faster than fathers, wives faster than husbands, because they have always been the vessels out of which humanity trickles. Since forever, children have hatched from them like chicks from eggs. And then the egg would have to put itself back together on its own. The stronger the woman, the more children she bore, and was weaker for it. In its forty-fifth year of life, Florentynka's body, liberated from the circle of perpetual birthing, achieved a peculiar nirvana of infertility.

When Florentynka went insane, dogs and cats began appearing in her farmyard. Soon, people began treating her like the salvation of their consciences. Instead of drowning their kittens and puppies, they would just throw them beneath her clusters of hydrangea. Her two cows, the breadwinners, fed Florentynka's flock of animal foundlings. Florentynka always treated her animals with respect, as though they were people. In the morning she would tell them "good morning," and when she set down their bowls of milk, she would never forget to say "bon apetite." What's more, she never talked about them as "dogs" or "cats," because that sounded like she was talking about

things. Instead, she would say "Dogsons" and "Catsbergs," the same as she would talk about the Malaks or Chlipals.

Florentynka did not at all notice that she was crazy. The moon persecuted her, like any normal persecutor. But one night something strange happened.

As usual, whenever there was a full moon, Florentynka took her dogs and went to the hill to curse the moon. The Dogsons lay down in the grass around her and she began yelling into the sky:

"Where is my son? How did you fool him, you fat, silver toad? You tricked my old man, and pulled him into the water! I saw you in the well today! I caught you red-handed! You poisoned our water!"

A light came on in the Seraphims' house. A man's voice yelled into the dark.

"Quiet you loon! We're trying to sleep!"

"Then sleep! Sleep 'til you're dead! Why were you born if you just sleep now?"

The voice quieted. Florentynka sat on the ground and looked into the silver face of her tormentor. Her eyes were bleary and her face was covered with deep wrinkles with the traces of some kind of cosmic smallpox. The Dogsons were lying on the grass, the moon reflecting in their dark eyes. They sat quietly and the old woman laid her hand on the head of one of the shaggy dogs. Then she saw in her thoughts a thought that was not hers, not even a thought, but the silhouette of a thought, a picture, an impression. This something was alien to her mind, not only because it came from the outside, as she felt it had, but because it was completely different, of one color, clear, deep, sensual, aromatic.

In the sky there were two moons, one beside the other. There was a river, cold and joyful. There were houses, seductive and yet terrible at the same time. There was the line of the forest, the sight of which was full of a strange excitement. There were sticks, stones, and leaves lying in the grass, filled with pictures and memories. Beside them ran paths full of meanings. Beneath the Earth there were warm, living tunnels. Everything was different. Only the silhouettes of the world remained the same. Then, with her human reason, Florentynka understood that the people had been right. She had gone mad.

"Am I talking to you?" she asked the dog whose head she had been holding in her lap.

She knew it was so.

They returned home. Florentynka poured the rest of the evening's milk into the bowls. She also sat down to eat. She soaked a piece of bread in the milk and chewed it with her toothless gums. Eating, she looked at one of the dogs and tried to tell it something just with an image. She sent him a thought, "imagining" something like: "I am and I eat." The dog raised its head.

That night, either because of the moon-tormentor or because of her madness, Florentynka learned how to talk with her dogs and cats. The conversations depended on the sending of pictures. What the animals imagined was neither well developed nor concrete, unlike human speech. There was no reflection in it. They were things seen from the inside, without any kind of human distance that brings a feeling of alienation. Because of this the world seems friendlier.

For Florentynka, those two moons from the animals' pictures were the most important. It was strange that animals see two moons and people only see one. Florentynka could not understand that, so finally, she stopped wanting to understand. The moons were different. In one sense they were even each other's opposite, but identical at the same time. One was soft, somewhat moist, and sensitive. The other was hard like silver, joyfully ringing and shining. The nature of Florentynka's tormentor doubled and so it threatened her all the more.

The Time of Misha

When Misha was ten years old she was the smallest in her class, so she sat in the first row. As the teacher would walk between the benches, she would always stroke Misha's head.

On the way home from school she would collect things for her dolls, chestnut shells for plates, acorn tops for cups, moss for pillows.

But when she would get home, she could never decide what she wanted to play. There were her dolls that she could dress and feed with meals that no one could see, but existed anyway. Their unmoving bodies asked to be wrapped in diapers and to be told bedtime stories. But when she would gather them into her arms, she suddenly lost any desire to play with them. They were no longer Karmilla, or Judyta, or Bobaska. Now, Misha could see their eyes painted flat onto pink faces, their red painted cheeks, their drawn mouths that had never known the taste of food. Misha turned Karmilla, or what she had once thought of as Karmilla, and smacked it. She could feel that all she was hitting was material stuffed with sawdust. The doll neither complained nor protested. So

Misha sat it down with its face to the window and stopped playing with it. Instead, she went to rummage around in her mother's closet.

She thought it wonderful to sneak into her parents' bedroom and sit in front of the double paned mirror that could even show what was normally invisible, shadows in the corners, the back of her own head. Misha would try on her mother's necklaces and rings. She would open the small bottles of perfume and study the secret of her mother's lipsticks for a long time. One day, when she was especially dissatisfied with her Karmillas, she lifted a lipstick to her mouth and painted them blood red. The lipstick moved time forward, and Misha saw herself several years later, the way she would look when she died. She frantically wiped the lipstick off her mouth and returned to her dolls. She picked up the ragged paws stuffed with sawdust and silently stroked them.

She would always return to her mother's closet though. She would try on her satin brassieres and high heels. She would make herself dresses from lace slips that touched the floor. She looked at herself in the mirror and suddenly found herself funny. "Wouldn't it be better to sew a ball gown for Karmilla?" she thought to herself, and excited by that thought, she returned to her dolls.

One day, on her way between her mother's closet and her dolls, Misha discovered a drawer in the kitchen table. Everything was in that drawer. The entire world.

One: It held photographs. Her father was in one, dressed in a Russian uniform with another soldier. They were embracing each other like friends. Her father had a moustache that stretched from one ear to the other. A fountain was spouting in the background. In another were her mother's and father's heads. Her mother wore a white veil, and her father still had that same black moustache. Misha's favorite photo was a

picture of her mother with short hair pushed back with a kerchief. Her mother looked like a real lady in that picture. There was also a photo of Misha there. She was sitting on a bench in front of the house with the coffee mill in her lap. The lilacs were blooming above her head.

Two: In the drawer there was also the darkest object in the house, the "moon stone." That was how she called it. Her father found it one day in a field and said that it was different from any other normal stone. It was almost perfectly round, and blended into its surface were the specks of something sparkling. It looked like a Christmas tree ornament. Misha put it to her ear and waited for some kind of sound, a sign from the stone. But the stone was quiet.

Three: There was also an old thermometer. The small glass tube inside it was broken so that the mercury was able to wander about the thermometer unhindered by any scale, independent of the temperature. It would spread itself out into a stream, and then sit motionless, curled up into a ball like a frightened animal. At one moment it would appear to be black, and at another time it was black, silver and white at the same time. Misha liked playing with the thermometer with the mercury locked in it. She saw the mercury as a living creature. She named it "Sparkle." When she would open the drawer she would quietly say:

"Good morning, Sparkle."

Four: The drawer also contained all the old, broken and unfashionable plastic jewelry that her parents could not resist buying from past church fairs. There was a broken necklace whose gold paint had been worn away. Now it had revealed the gray metal beneath. There was also a delicate, open-worked horn brooch depicting Cinderella

being helped by the birds in separating the peas from the ashes. Among the papers were the forgotten glass eyes of small rings, the clasps of earrings, and glass beads of different shapes. Misha marveled at their simple, useless beauty. She would look out the window through the green eye of one of the rings. The world became different. Beautiful. She could never decide in which world she would prefer to live, in the green, ruby, blue or gold.

Five: Among the other things lay a switchblade that had been hidden from children. Misha was afraid of that knife, even though she sometimes imagined she knew how to use it. She imagined using it to defend her father from someone trying to hurt him. The knife looked innocent. It had a dark red ebonite handle in which the blade was cunningly hidden. Misha saw once how her father would release it with the mere movement of a finger. The very "click" sounded like an attack and sent shivers down Misha's spine. That was why she was careful not to touch the knife, even by accident. She left it in its place, deep inside the right corner of the drawer, beneath some pictures of the saints.

Six: The saints' pictures had been collected over the years from the parish priest, who would hand them out to children who were Christmas caroling. Almost all of them depicted either Our Holy Lady of Jeszkotle or the infant Lord Jesus in a small shirt shepherding a lamb. The Lord Jesus was pudgy and he had bright curly hair. Misha loved that kind of Lord Jesus. One of the pictures depicted a bearded Lord Father reclining on a blue throne. He was holding a broken staff. For a long time Misha did not know what that was. Then she understood that the Lord God was holding a bolt of lightning, and she began to fear him.

A small medallion was lying around the pictures. It was no ordinary medallion. It had been made from a kopeck. The image of the Holy Mother had been drawn on one side, and the out spread wings of an eagle on the other.

Seven: The drawer rattled with the sound of some small, square dice made from pigs' bones. Misha was careful that when her mother was making a gelatin she did not throw out the bones. One had to thoroughly clean the bones, and then dry them in the oven. Misha liked holding them in her hands. They were light, and so similar to each other, similar even when they came from different pigs. Misha wondered how it was possible that every pig that was killed for Christmas or Easter, that every pig in the world had within itself such similar bones that you could make into dice. Sometimes Misha would think about living pigs, and she would feel bad for them. But at least in their death they left behind little bones you could play with.

Eight: In the drawer her parents also stored old, used Volta batteries. At first Misha would not touch them, just like the switchblade. Her father had said that they could still be charged with energy. But the idea of energy locked within a small, smooth box was unusually fascinating. It reminded her of the mercury trapped in the thermometer. However, she could see the mercury, but not this energy. What does energy look like? Misha took a battery and weighed it in her hand. Energy was heavy. In this one little box there must have been a lot of energy. It was probably packed in there like when they pickle cabbage, shoved in with a finger. Then Misha touched the gold wire with her tongue and felt a delicate tingling. It was some of the leftover invisible energy escaping from the battery.

Nine: Misha also found various medicines in the drawer and she knew that it was absolutely forbidden to taste any. There were some of her mother's pills, and some of her father's ointments. Misha especially respectwed her mother's pills that were in a little paper bag. Before her mother would take them she would be angry, irritated, and she would also have headaches. But then, after she swallowed them she would calm down, and begin playing solitaire.

And finally, Ten: In the drawer there were also cards for playing solitaire or rummy. On one side they all looked similar, with green ornamental plants, but when Misha would turn them over, a gallery of portraits would be revealed. Misha would look at the faces of the kings and queens for hours on end. She would try to explore the relationships between them. She suspected that as soon as she closed the drawer they began carrying on long conversations, maybe even arguments over imaginary kingdoms. She liked the queen of spades the most. She seemed to Misha to be the most beautiful and the saddest. The queen of spades had an awful husband. The queen of spades had no friends. She was very lonely. Misha would always look for her in the rows of her mother's games of solitaire. She also looked for her when her mother would use the cards to tell fortunes. But her mother would always stare at the spread out cards for too long. Misha would get bored when nothing happened on the table. Then she would return to rummaging through the drawer that held the entire world.

The Time of Kloska

In Kloska's cottage on Blowing Hill there lived a snake, an owl, and a hawk. The animals never got in each other's way. The snake lived in the kitchen, around the

fireplace, and Kloska would leave him his saucer of milk there. The owl sat on a beam in the alcove above the walled up window. It looked like a small statue. The hawk lived in a vault of the ceiling, in the highest point of the house, but its real home was the sky.

It took Kloska the longest to tame the snake. She would leave him a saucer of milk every day, moving it closer and closer to the inside of the house. One day the snake crawled around her legs. She picked him up and the smell of her warm skin, a smell of grass and milk, must have turned his head. He wrapped himself around her arm, and stared into Kloska's bright eyes with his golden pupils. She named him Goldy.

Goldy fell in love with Kloska. Her warm skin warmed the snake's cold body and heart. He coveted her fragrances and the velvet touch of her skin, which could not be compared to anything else on Earth. When Kloska would take him into her hands, it seemed to him, an ordinary reptile, that he would change into something completely different, something unusually important. As gifts he would bring her the mice he hunted, beautiful white pebbles from the riverbank, and pieces of bark. Once he brought her an apple. She laughed as she brought it to her face, and her laugh smelled of plentitude.

"You little tempter," she said to him tenderly.

Sometimes she would throw him a piece of her clothing, and Goldy would wind himself within the dress and gorge himself on the remnants of Kloska's smell. He would wait for her at every path, and wherever she would go he would follow her every movement. During the day, she would let him lie on her bed. She would carry him around her neck like a silver necklace, or wrap him around her hip, or he would stand in as a bracelet. At night, he would watch her as she slept, furtively licking her ears.

Goldy was hurt whenever the woman made love to the Bad Man. He felt that the Bad Man was neither a person nor an animal. He would hide in the leaves or look at the sun straight in the eyes. Goldy's guardian angel lived in the sun. Dragons are the guardian angels of snakes.

Once, Kloska was walking through some fields along the River looking for herbs with the snake around her neck. She met the parish priest there. The priest saw them and drew back quickly.

"You witch!" he screamed, waving his cane about. "Keep yourself far away from Longago and Jeszkotle and my parish. You dare walk around with the Devil around your neck? Have you never heard what the Bible says? Do you not know what God told the snake? 'And I shall be enmity between you and the woman, and she will bruise in the head and you will bruise her in the heel."

Kloska laughed out loud and pulled up her dress, revealing her naked stomach.

"Back! Back Satan!" the priest yelled, crossing himself several times.

In the summer of 1927, an angelica sprouted in front of Kloska's cottage. Kloska watched it from the moment its thick, oily, stiff shoot forced its way out of the ground. She watched as it slowly unfurled its large leaves. It grew the entire summer, from day to day, from hour to hour, until it reached the roof of the cottage and opened its lavish umbels.

"Well, what now, young man?" Kloska asked it ironically. "You've stretched yourself out like this, you've climbed so high into the sky that now your seeds could grow in my roof instead of the ground."

The angelica was at least six and a half feet high, and its leaves were so large they took sunlight away from the other plants around it. By the end of the summer, no other plant was able to grow beside it. It bloomed on the Feast of Saint Michael, and for several hot nights, Kloska could not sleep because of the sweet and sour smell that permeated the air. The powerful, sinewy body of the plant reflected the light of the silver mooned sky in sharp edges. Sometimes a breeze would rustle the umbels, and they would shed their blossoms. Whenever she heard the rustling, Kloska would sit up on her elbows attentively, and listen to the plant living. The entire room was filled with the enchanting fragrance.

When Kloska finally went to sleep, a young man with bright hair was standing before her. He was tall and powerfully built. His arms and legs looked like polished wood. The moonlight illuminated him.

"I was watching you through the window," he said.

"I know. Your smell disturbs my thoughts."

The youth went to the middle of the room and stretched his hands out to Kloska. She nestled herself in between them, pressing her face into his mighty chest. He gently raised her until their lips found each other. From beneath her half closed eyes, Kloska saw his face. It was coarse like the stalk of a plant.

"I've wanted you the entire summer," she said into his mouth. It smelled sweet like candied fruit, and the ground after rain.

"I've wanted you as well."

They lay down on the floor, caressing each other like tall grass. Then, the angelica planted itself between Kloska's hips, taking root within her rhythmically, ever

deeper, permeating her entire body, penetrating every recess, drinking up her body's juices. It drank from her until morning, when the sky turned gray, and the birds began singing. Then, the angelica shuddered, and its hard body stopped moving and withered up like a piece of wood. The umbels rustled and placed a dry, thorny seedling into Kloska's naked, exhausted body. The bright haired youth went back to the yard in front of the house, and Kloska pulled fragrant seeds from her hair the entire day.

The Time of Michal

Misha had always been beautiful, from the moment he first saw her playing in front of the house. He loved her immediately. She fit perfectly into the ravaged little space of his soul. He offered her the coffee mill he had brought from the east, like a war trophy. With the coffee mill he surrendered himself into the little girl's arms so he could start everything over again.

He watched as she grew. He watched as her first teeth fell out and new ones appeared in their place. They were white, and too big to fit into her tiny mouth. He watched with delight as she would take out her braids in the evening and then slowly brush her hair. At first, Misha's hair was a chestnut color, then dark brown, but had always had red streaks, like blood, like fire. Michal would not let her hair be cut, not even when they grew entangled and stuck to the pillow while Misha was sick. The doctor from Jeszkotle told them that Misha might not survive. Michal fainted. He slid from the chair onto the floor. It was obvious that what Michal's body was saying with that fall was that if Misha died, Michal would also die. Just like that, without any doubt.

Michal did not know how to express what he was feeling. It seemed to him that a person who loves does so incessantly. So he would constantly give her surprise presents. He looked for sparkling stones in the river for her. He carved a flute from a willow branch. He painted empty eggshells. He folded paper birds. He bought toys in Kielce. He did everything that could make a little girl happy. But more than anything, he depended on large things, things that were permanent and beautiful, things that were related more with time than people. These things were supposed to keep his love forever. They were also supposed to keep Misha forever. Thanks to them, their love would become eternal.

If Michal had been a powerful ruler, he would have built Misha a mighty castle on a mountaintop, beautiful and indestructible. But Michal was only an ordinary miller, so he bought Misha clothing and toys, and he folded paper birds for her.

She had the most dresses of all the children in the area. She looked as beautiful as a young lady from the palace. She had real dolls bought in Kielce, dolls whose eyes blinked, and when they were turned on their backs they made a squeaking sound that was supposed to resemble a child's cry. She even had two wooden strollers for them. One had a removable top. She had a storied dollhouse, and several teddy bears. Wherever Michal would go he always thought of Misha, and would always miss her. He never raised his voice to her.

"You could spank her sometimes," Genovefa told him angrily.

The very thought of it, that he could strike this tiny, trusting body, brought on a weak feeling in Michal, the same that had once ended in his fainting. That was why Misha would often run to her father away from her angered mother. She would hide in

his flour whitened jacket like a little animal. He would stop, surprised once again by her untainted trust.

When she began going to school, Michal would take a short break every day so he could walk to the bridge, and watch as she returned home. Her small figure would emerge from the poplars. That sight would restore everything that Michal had lost with Misha's morning departure. Then he would look over her notebooks and help with her lessons. He also taught her Russian and German. He led her little hand over all the letters of the alphabet. He even sharpened her pencils.

Then in 1929 something began to change. Izydor had already been born, and the rhythm of life had changed. Michal once watched Misha and Genovefa as they were hanging laundry on the line. They were the same height, with white kerchiefs on their heads. On the line there was underwear, shirts, bras, and slips, some only a bit smaller than the others, but still womanly. For a moment he wondered whose the smaller were. Once he realized whose they were, he became confused like a young boy. Until that moment Misha's miniature clothing had evoked affection in him. Now, as he looked at the clothesline, he was overcome with anger that time had passed by so quickly. He would have preferred not to have seen that underwear.

One evening, at that same time, perhaps a bit later, before going to sleep, Genovefa told Michal in a sleepy voice that Misha had had her first period. Then she fell asleep, cuddled up with Michal, sighing like an old woman. Michal could not get to sleep. He lay there, staring into the darkness in front of him. When he finally went to sleep he had a strange dream.

He dreamt that he was walking along a border. Growing on both sides was either corn, or perhaps tall golden grass. He saw Kloska walking through it, mowing it with a sickle.

"Look," she said to him. "They're bleeding."

He bent down and saw that, in fact, there was blood flowing from the tops of the severed stalks. It seemed unnatural and terrible to him. He began to be afraid. He wanted to get out of there, but when he turned he saw Misha in the grass. She had her school uniform on, and she was lying with her eyes closed. He knew that she had died of typhus.

"She's alive," said Kloska. "But it's always like that, that one must first die."

She bent over Misha and said something into her ear. Misha woke up.

"Come on. We're going home." Michal took his daughter by the arm and tried to pull her after him.

But there was something wrong with Misha, as though she had not yet regained consciousness. She did not look at him.

"No daddy, I have too many things to take care of. I'm not going."

Then Kloska pointed to her mouth.

"Look, she doesn't move her lips when she talks."

In the dream, Michal understood that Misha had touched some kind of death, an incomplete death, but just as paralyzing as a real death.

The Time of Izydor

The November of 1928 was windy and rainy. So was the day that Genovefa began giving birth to her second child.

After Missus Kucmerka the midwife came running to the house, Michal took Misha to the Seraphim's. Mister Seraphim put a bottle of vodka on the table, and after a moment other neighbors began arriving. Everyone wanted to drink to Michal Niebieski's heirs.

At that same moment, Missus Kucmerka was boiling water and preparing some sheets. Genovefa moaned repeatedly as she paced about the kitchen.

At that same moment, in the autumnal firmament, Saturn sprawled itself out in Sagittarius like a great iceberg. The mighty Pluto, the planet that helps in the crossing of borders, was perched in Cancer. That night, Pluto took Mars and the delicate Moon into its arms. In the harmony of the eight heavens, the sensitive ears of the angels heard a clanging sound similar to teacups falling and shattering into pieces.

At that same moment, Kloska had just swept her room and was crouching over a pile of last year's hay. She began giving birth. It lasted a few minutes. She gave birth to a big, beautiful baby. The roomed smelled of the angelica.

At that same moment at the Niebieskis' the head had showed and Genovefa began having problems. She fainted. The frightened Missus Kucmerka opened the window and yelled into the darkness:

"Michal! Michal! Everyone!"

But the storm drowned out her voice, and Missus Kucmerka understood that she would have to deliver the baby on her own.

"You weakling! You're no woman!" she yelled at Genovefa, trying to give herself courage. "You should go to dances, not give birth. She'll strangle the baby, she'll strangle it!"

She slapped Genovefa in the face.

"Jesus! Push! Push!"

"A daughter? A son?" Genovefa asked half consciously. But the pain sobered her some, and she began pushing.

"A son, a daughter, what's the difference? That's it, more, more!"

The child splashed into Missus Kucmerka's hands, and Genovefa fainted once again. Missus Kucmerka took care of the child. It began whimpering quietly.

"A daughter?" Genovefa asked, waking up.

"A daughter? A daughter?" the midwife said mockingly. "You're a sop not a woman."

Some breathless women came into the house.

"Go and tell Michal that he has a son," Missus Kucmerka ordered them.

They named the child Izydor. Genovefa was weakened. She had a fever, and she could not breast feed the child. She said something deliriously, that they were changing her child. When she came to her senses she immediately said:

"Give me my daughter."

"We have a son," Michal answered.

Genovefa watched the child for a long time. It was a boy, big and pale. He had thin eyelids, in which she could see blue veins. His head seemed too big. He was very fussy, he cried, the smallest sound disturbed him, and he would scream so loud that

nothing could calm him down. A creak from the floor or the ticking of a clock was enough to wake him.

"It's because of that cow's milk," said Missus Kucmerka. "You need to start nursing him."

"I have no milk, I have no milk," Genovefa moaned desperately. "We need to find a wet nurse quickly."

"Kloska just gave birth."

"I don't want Kloska," said Genovefa.

They found a wet nurse in Jeszkotle. She was a Jew. One of her twins had died. Michal had to drive her twice a day to the mill.

Even though he was being nursed on mother's milk, Izydor still cried. Genovefa carried him back and forth from the bedroom to the kitchen entire nights on end. She tried to lay down and ignore the crying, but then Michal would quietly get up so as not to disturb Misha's sleep, wrap the baby in a blanket, and carry him outside beneath the starlit sky. He would carry his son onto Blowing Hill, or along the Highway towards the forest. The child was calmed by the rocking and the smell of the pines, but as soon as Michal returned home and stepped through the doorway, he would begin crying again.

Sometimes, pretending to be asleep, Michal would look from under his closed eyes at his wife as she stood over the cradle, looking at the child. She would look at him indifferently, coolly, as though she were looking at a thing, an object, and not a person. The child, feeling that gaze, would cry even louder, and more pathetically. What was going on in the heads of the mother and the child, Michal had no idea, but one night Genovefa whispered lowly to Michal:

"That's not our child. That's Kloska's child. Missus Kucmerka said 'daughter' to me, I remember that. Then, something must have happened. Kloska must have tricked Missus Kucmerka, because when I woke up it was a son."

Michal sat up and turned on a lamp. He saw his wife's face wet with tears.

"Geno, you can't think like that. That's Izydor, our son. He even resembles me. We wanted a son after all."

That short conversation changed something in the Niebieski house. Now they both observed the child. Michal looked for similarities. Genovefa furtively checked her son's fingers, looked over the skin on his back, and examined the shape of his ears. The older the child got, the more proof she found that he was not their son.

On Izydor's first birthday he still did not have a single tooth. He could barely sit up, and he had hardly grown. It was visible that all his growth had been his head. Even though his face had remained small, Izydor's head had grown in breadth and width from his brow.

In the spring of 1930, they took him to a doctor in Taszov.

"It could be water on the brain. The child will probably die. There's nothing that can be done."

The doctor's words were like a magic spell that awakened in Genovefa her love that had been frozen by her suspicions.

Now, Genovefa loved Izydor the way she would have loved a dog, or a lame, helpless animal. It was the purest human compassion.

The Time of the Baron Popielski

The Baron Popielski had a lot of time for his interests. Every year he would gain another fishing lake. The carp in these lakes were gigantic and fat. They would almost pack themselves into the fishing nets when their time had come. The baron loved walking along the dams, circling along them, looking into the water and then the sky. The abundance of fish calmed his nerves. The lakes allowed him to grasp hold of some kind of sense within this everything. The more lakes he had, the more sense there was. The Baron Popielski's mind had a lot of work to do as it was busied with his ponds. It had to plan, it had to conceive, to count, to create, to finagle. The Baron's mind could think about the ponds all the time, and then it did not stray into the dark, cold regions that could swallow like a swamp.

In the evenings, the Baron would devote his time to the family. His wife, slim and delicate like a rush, would besiege him with a storm of problems, which he found petty and unimportant. About the servants, about a party, about the children's schools, about the car, about the money, about the almshouse. In the evenings, she would sit with him in the salon, drowning out the music on the radio with her monotonous voice. It used to make the Baron happy when she would massage his back. Now, once an hour, her thin fingers would only flip a page of the book she had been reading for a year. The children were growing, and the Baron knew less and less about them. His oldest daughter, with her contemptuous pouting lips, embarrassed him with her presence like a stranger or even an enemy. His son had grown quiet and timid. He would no longer sit on his lap or pull at his moustache. The youngest son, beloved and spoiled, would be defiant and would have fits of anger.

In 1931, the Popielskis went to Italy with their children. When he came back from vacation, the Baron Popielski immediately knew that he had found his passion. In art. He began to collect books about painting, and then he would go to Cracow more and more often where he would buy the paintings. What was more, he would often invite artists to the palace, conduct discussions and drink with them. At dawn, he would lead the entire group to his ponds and show off the olive bodies of the enormous carps.

The next year, the Baron Popielski fell madly in love with Maria Szer, a young painter from Cracow who was a representative of futurism. As usually happens with sudden love, meaningful coincidences began occurring in his life, like knowing the same people as she did and having to go on sudden trips. Thanks to Maria Szer, the Baron Popielski fell in love with contemporary art. His lover was like futurism, full of energy, crazy, and in a certain sense she was as sharp as the devil. She had a body like a statue, smooth and hard. Her light wisps of hair would stick to her forehead when she was working over a large canvas. She was the complete opposite of the Baron's wife. Next to her, his wife resembled a classical, eighteenth century landscape, full of details, harmonious, and painfully static.

In the thirty-eighth year of his life, the Baron Popielski felt that he had just discovered sex. It was wild and crazy sex, like contemporary art, like Maria Szer. Next to the bed in the studio stood a large mirror which reflected the entire transformation of Maria Szer and the Baron Popielski into a woman and a man. The mirror reflected the twirled bed sheets and sheepskins and naked bodies smeared with paint, the grimaces on their faces, the naked breasts and bellies, and backs with lines of smeared lipstick.

As the Baron Popielski was driving back to the palace from Cracow in his new car, he would devise plans to run away to Brazil, to Africa with his Maria, but when he would enter the house, he was happy that everything was in its place, stable and safe, certain.

After six months of this madness, Maria Szer announced to the Baron that she was leaving for America. She said that everything there was new, full of momentum, and energy. That there one could create one's own life like a futuristic painting. After her departure, the Baron Popielski came down with a strange, multi-symptom illness that they called arthritis for purposes of simplicity. For a month, he lay in bed, not so much because of pain and weakness, but because what he had been trying to forget for the past few years came back. That the world was ending and reality was falling apart like a decaying tree, that mold was gnawing away at matter from below, that all this was happening with no sense and that it meant nothing. The Baron's body gave up. It was also falling apart. The same happened to his will. The time between making a decision and taking action swelled and became impossible to traverse. The Baron Popielski's throat was swollen and gagged. All this meant that he was still alive, that some processes were still taking place in his body. His blood was flowing. His heart was beating. "It's gotten me," the Baron was thinking and, lying in bed, he tried to focus his eyes on something, but his sight had become sticky. It would wander around objects in the room and sit on them like a fly. Plop! It would sit on a pile of books that the Baron had wanted brought to him, though he would not read them. Plop! A bottle with medicine. Plop! Some stain on the wall. Plop! A view of the sky out the window. He was tired of looking at people in the eye. They seemed so mobile, so changeable. One had to be very

alert to watch them, and the Baron Popielski did not have enough strength to be alert. He would turn away his eyes.

The Baron Popielski had a terrible, overwhelming feeling that the world was passing him by, and that everything that was good and bad in it, love, sex, money, passion, long journeys, beautiful paintings, wise books, great people, all of it was moving sideways. The Baron's time was passing by. Then, in sudden despair, he wanted to jump to his feet and run off somewhere. But where, and what for? He would fall back onto his pillows and choke on the uncried tears.

And again the spring brought some hope of salvation. When he started walking again, he had to use a cane. He stood at his favorite pond and asked himself the first question: "Where am I coming from?" He stirred uneasily. "Where did I come from, where is my beginning?" He went back home and with difficulty forced himself to read about antiquity and prehistory, about excavations and Cretan culture, about anthropology and heraldry. But all this knowledge did not lead him to anything, so he asked himself a second question. "What, in general, can one know? What are the benefits of acquiring knowledge? And can one know something completely?" He thought and thought, and on Saturdays, he would discuss this subject with Pelski, who would come to play bridge. Nothing would come out of these discussions and reflections. With time, he no longer even wanted to open his mouth. He knew what Pelski would say and what he himself would say. He had the impression that they were talking about the same thing all the time, that they were repeating their lines as if they were playing roles, and like moths they were approaching a lamp and then running away from the obvious that could burn them. So finally he asked himself a third question: "What should one do? How should

one live? What to do and what not to do?" He read Machiavelli's *The Prince*, books by Thoreau, Kropotkin, and Kotarbinski. Throughout the summer, he read so much that he hardly left his room. One evening, the Baroness Popielska, worried by all this, came up to his desk and said:

"They say that rabbi from Jeszkotle is a healer. I went to see him and asked him to come here. He agreed to."

The Baron smiled, disarmed by his wife's naivete.

The conversation was not the way he had imagined it would be. A young Jew came with the rabbi because the rabbi did not speak Polish. The Baron Popielski did not feel like confessing his suffering to this strange couple. So he asked the old man his three questions, even though, in all honesty, he did not count on any answers. The young boy with earlocks interpreted the clear, distinct Polish sentences into the rabbi's twisted, throaty language. Then the rabbi surprised the Baron.

"You collect questions. That's good. I have one final question for your collection: 'Where are we going? What is the goal of time?'"

The rabbi stood up. In saying goodbye he shook the Baron's hand with a polite gesture. After a moment he said something faintly from the door and the boy translated it.

"The times of some tribes are coming to an end. That is why I will give you something that should be yours now."

The Jew's seriousness and mysterious tone amused the Baron. For the first time in months, he ate his supper heartily and joked with his wife.

"You've resorted to sorcery to cure me of my arthritis. The best cure for bad joints is, as you can see, an old Jew who answers questions with questions."

They had carp in gelatin for supper.

The next day, the boy with the earlocks came to the Baron and brought a big wooden box. The Baron opened it with curiosity. There were compartments inside. In one there lay an old book with a title in Latin: *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player.*

In the next compartment, lined with velvet, sat a wooden eight-sided die. On each side there was a different number of dots, from one to eight. The Baron Popielski had never seen such a die. In the remaining compartments there were miniature brass figurines of people, animals, and objects. Underneath, he found a piece of frayed linen folded several times. Surprised more and more by this strange gift, he unfolded the linen on the floor until it took up almost the whole empty space between the desk and the bookshelf. It was some kind of game in the form of a large circular labyrinth.

The Time of the Drowned Man Plushch

The drowned man was the soul of the peasant named Plushch. Plushch drowned in a pond one August when the vodka he had drunk thinned his blood too much. He was coming back home from Vola by wagon when the horses were suddenly frightened by the moon's shadows and tipped over the wagon. The peasant fell into the shallow water and the horses walked away embarrassed. The August heat had warmed the water next to the shore, and Plushch lay in it happily. He did not notice that he was dying. After the warm water had forced its way into his lungs, he moaned, but did not sober up.

The dizzy soul, trapped in his drunken body, unabsolved, and without a map of the path to God, remained next to the cold body in the bulrushes like a dog.

Such a soul is blind and helpless. It stubbornly keeps returning to the body because it does not know any other way of existing. However, it longs for the world from which it came, in which it had always been, and from which it had been pushed out into the world of matter. It remembers this world, lamenting and longing for it, but it does not know how to return to it. It is born away by waves of despair. Then it leaves the already-rotting body and looks for the path on its own. It roams about the crossroads and highways, it tries to hitchhike on the roads. It takes on different forms. It enters things and animals, sometimes even barely conscious people, but it cannot stay anywhere long. It is an exile in the world of matter. The world of spirit does not want it either. Because to enter the world of spirit it must have the map.

After these hopeless wanderings, the soul returns to the body or to the place where it left the body. But a cold, dead body is what the smoldering ashes of a house are for a living person. The soul tries to move the dead heart, the dead, inert eyelids, but it does not have enough strength or determination. The dead body, in harmony with God's order, says "no." The body of a person becomes a detested house. The place of the body's death becomes the detested prison of the soul. The soul of a drowned man rustles in the reeds, pretends to be a shadow, and sometimes borrows some shape from the fog, with the help of which it tries to communicate with people. It does not understand why people avoid it, why it arouses fear in them.

Thus, in its confusion, Plushch's soul still thought that it was Plushch.

With time, disappointment and aversion to everything human arose in Plushch's soul. Remnants of the old human or even animal thoughts, some memories and images got mixed up in it. It believed that it could once again perform the moment of the catastrophe, the moment of Plushch's or someone else's death, and that this would help free itself. This is why it so wanted to scare off some horses again, to tip over a wagon, and drown someone. This is how the Drowned Man was born in Plushch's soul.

For a home, the Drowned Man chose the forest pond behind the causeway and bridge, the whole forest called Wodenica, and the meadows from Paper Hill all the way to Blowing Hill where the fog was especially heavy. He would roam around his domain, thoughtless and empty. Only sometimes, when he met a human being or an animal would he become lively with a feeling of anger. His existence would gain meaning then. At all costs, he would try to inflict some kind of evil, whether big or small, onto the creature he had come across.

The Drowned Man would rediscover his abilities all the time. First he thought that he was weak and helpless, that he was some kind of whirling air, a light mist, a puddle of water. Then he discovered that he could move with a thought, and that it was faster than anyone could imagine. Whatever place he thought of, he was immediately there. In the twinkling of an eye. He also discovered that the fog listened to him. That he could rule it however he wanted. He could take its strength or use it to make a shape for himself. He could move entire clouds of fog to conceal the sun, blur the horizon, or lengthen the night. The Drowned Man regarded himself as a Lord of Fog, and from that moment began to think of himself as such, as the Lord of Fog.

The Lord of Fog felt best under water. For whole years, he would lie beneath its surface on a bed of silt and rotting leaves. From beneath the water, he would watch the seasons change and the wanderings of the sun and moon. He would see the rain, the falling autumn leaves, the dance of the summer dragonflies, the people swimming, the orange legs of wild ducks. Sometimes, something would wake him up from this dream-not-dream, sometimes not. He did not wonder about it. He endured.

The Time of Old Boski

Old Boski spent his entire life on the palace roof. The palace was huge so the roof was also enormous. It was full of slopes and angles and edges. It was covered with beautiful, wooden shingles. If the palace roof were flattened and stretched out on the ground, it would cover Boski's entire field.

Boski left the farming of this land to his wife and children. He had three girls and one boy, Pavel, who was talented and muscular. Every morning, Boski would get on the roof and change the decaying and rotten shingles. His work had no end. It also had no beginning. Boski would not start from one specific place or move in any specific direction. He would examine the wooden roof on his knees, meter after meter, and move here and there.

In the afternoon, his wife would come with lunch in a double pot. In one dish there would be zhur soup, and potatoes in the other, or buckwheat with pieces of bacon and curds, or cabbage and potatoes. Old Boski did not come down for lunch. His wife

would send the double pot up in a bucket on the string that he used to bring up the shingles.

Boski would eat, and look about the world as he chewed. From the palace roof, he could see meadows, the Black River, the roofs of Longago, and the figures of people so tiny and fragile, that Old Boski wanted to blow at them and blow them off the world like rubbish. While he thought this, he would stuff his mouth with the next bite of food, and a grimace that could have been a smile, would appear on his sunburned face. Boski enjoyed this moment every day, the image he would have of the people being blown off to every corner of the world. Sometimes, he would imagine it slightly differently. His breath would become a hurricane, tear the roofs off the houses, knock over trees, and mow down the orchards. The water would force its way onto the plains, and the people would frantically build boats to save themselves and their belongings. Craters would form in the Earth, and pure fire would erupt from them. The steam from the fight between the fire and water would gush towards the sky. Everything would shake in its foundations and finally cave in like the roof of an old house. People would stop being important. Boski would destroy the entire world.

He would swallow a bite and sigh. The vision would disappear. He would roll up a cigarette and look at the palace courtyard, the park and moat, at the swans, and the pond. He would watch the approaching carriages, and later cars. From the roof, he would see women's hats and men's bald heads. He would see the Baron returning from a horse ride and the heiress who always walked in tiny steps. He would see the young lady, fragile and delicate, and her dogs that evoked fear throughout the village. He would see the eternal movement of the multitude of people, their welcoming and parting

gestures, their facial expressions, people coming and going and talking and listening to each other.

But why would he care about them? He would finish his cigarette, and his gaze would stubbornly return to the wooden shingles so it could settle down on them like a river mussel and feast and feed on them. He would already be thinking about cutting and trimming, and this was how his lunch breaks would end.

His wife would take the double pot after he had lowered it with the string, then go back to Longago through the meadows.

The Time of Pavel Boski

Old Boski's son, Pavel, wanted to be someone "important." He was afraid that if it did not begin happening soon, he would end up as "unimportant" as his father, and he too would be forever putting shingles on a roof. So when he was sixteen, he left the house that his ugly sister had ruled. He found work in Jeszkotle with a Jew. The Jew was named Aba Koziencki and he dealt in lumber. In the beginning, Pavel worked as a common lumberjack and wood loader, but Aba must have liked him because he quickly entrusted Pavel with the important job of sorting logs.

Even while he was sorting trees, Pavel Boski would always be looking to the future. The past did not interest him. The very thought that he could shape the future, that he could have an influence on what would happen excited him. Sometimes, he would wonder how it all worked. If he had been born in the palace like Popielski, would

he be the same as he now was? Would he think the same way? Would he still like Misha Niebieski? Would he still want to be a paramedic, or would he shoot higher — a doctor, a professor in a university?

Young Boski was certain of one thing. Knowledge. Knowledge and education were open to everyone. Of course, it was easier for others, for the Popielski's and those like them. It was unfair, but then, he too could study, though it demanded greater effort. After all, he had to earn a living for himself and his parents.

So after school, he would go to the district library and check out some books. The district library was badly supplied. It lacked encyclopedias and dictionaries. The shelves were filled with drivel like *The Daughters of Kings*, and *Without a Dowry*, books for women. At home, he hid the borrowed books from his sisters in his bed. He did not like it when they touched his things.

All three of them were big, massive and rude. Their heads seemed small. They had low foreheads and thick light hair. Like straw. The most beautiful of the three was Stasha. When she would smile, her white teeth would sparkle in the middle of her sunburned face. Her awkward, duck like legs were a small blemish. The middle sister, Tosha, was betrothed to a farmer from Kotuszov, and Zosha, big and strong, was supposed to go to Kielce any day to start her job as a maid. Pavel was happy that they were leaving home, even though he did not like his home anymore than he liked his sisters.

He hated the dirt that squeezed in between the cracks of the old, wooden cottage, into the floors, under his fingernails. He hated the stench of cow manure that his clothing absorbed when he walked into the barn. He hated the smell of the steaming potatoes for

the pigs. It permeated the entire house, every single thing in the house, his hair and skin. He hated the boorish accent his parents spoke that would sometimes push its way into his own speech. He hated the sheets, the unpainted wood and wooden spoons, the kitschy pictures of the saints, the fat legs of his sisters. Sometimes, he was able to store his hatred in his jaw, and then he felt a great strength within himself. He knew that he would have everything that he desired, that he would move forward and no one would be able to stop him.

The Time of the Game

The labyrinth drawn on the canvas was made of eight circles or spheres called Worlds. The closer one got to the center, the denser the labyrinth seemed, and there appeared more dead ends and lanes leading nowhere. In contrast, the outside spheres seemed lighter and more spacious, and the labyrinth paths appeared wider and less chaotic, as though they were inviting him to wander about. The sphere that made up the center of the labyrinth, the darkest and most tangled was called the First World. Someone's inept hand had drawn an arrow next to the world with an indelible pencil and had written: "Longago." "Why Longago?" the Baron Popielski asked himself surprised. "Why not Kotuszov, Jeszkotle, Kielce, Cracow, Paris, or London?" The complicated system of paths, crossroads, forks, and fields intricately lead to one passage to the next circular sphere known as the Second World. Here it was a little more open compared to the tangle of the center,. There were two passages that led to the Third World and the Baron Popielski quickly realized that in every World there would be twice as many exits

than in the last. He precisely counted all the exits of the last sphere of the labyrinth with the tip of a fountain pen. There were 128.

The small book, *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player*, was only the instructions of the game written in Latin and Polish. The Baron flipped through the pages and it all seemed very complicated to him. The instructions described every possible result from a throw of the die, every move, every pawn-figure and all of the Eight Worlds. The description seemed incoherent and full of digressions, until finally, the Baron thought that he had the work of a madman in front of him.

> The game is a kind of path on which choices appear time after time.

Those were the first words.

> The choices take place on their own, but the player sometimes has the feeling that he is making them consciously. Maybe it frightens him when he feels responsible for where he finds himself and what he meets.
>
> The player sees his path as a crack in the ice, lines that branch off, turn and change their course at a staggering pace. Or like the lightning in the sky that searches a path for itself through the air in a way that is impossible to predict. The player, who believes in God, will say: "decrees of God," "the hand of God," that all powerful and mighty remnant of the Creator. And if he does not believe in God, he will say: "An accident," "a

coincidence." Sometimes, the player will use the words "my free choice," but he will certainly say it quietly and without conviction.

The game is a map of an escape. It begins in the center of the labyrinth. Its purpose is to pass through all the spheres and become free of the Eight Worlds.

The Baron Popielski flipped through the description of the pieces and strategies for starting the Game, until he got to the characteristics of the First World. He read:

In the beginning there was no God. There was no time or space. There was only light and darkness. And that was perfect.

He had the feeling that he knew those words from somewhere.

The light moved in itself and shined. The pillar of light mingled into the darkness and there it found ever-motionless matter. It struck it with all its might until it awakened God within it. God, who was still unconscious and still uncertain what he was, looked around, and since he saw no one other than himself, he decided that he was God. Nameless and incomprehensible to himself, he desired to know himself. When he examined himself the first time, the Word was uttered. It seemed to God that knowing meant naming.

The Word rolled from the lips of God and shattered into a thousand pieces, which became the seeds of the Worlds. From that moment, the Worlds grew, and God was reflected in them as in a mirror. Looking at his reflection, he saw more and more of himself, knew himself better and better, and this knowing was enriched and so enriched the Worlds.

God knows himself through the flow of time, because only that which is indefinable and changeable is most like God. He knows himself through rocks that rise hot to the surface of the sea, through plants in love with the sun, through the generations of animals. When people appeared, God experienced a revelation. For the first time, he knew how to name the fragile line in himself between night and day, that subtle border from which the bright begins to be dark, and the dark bright. Since then, he watches himself in the eyes of people. He sees thousands of his faces and tries each one on like masks, and, like an actor, becomes the mask for a moment. Praying to himself with people's mouths, he discovers a contradiction within himself, because in the mirror a reflection is sometimes real, and reality turns into a reflection.

"Who am I?" asks God. "God or a person, or maybe both at the same time, or neither one? Did I create people, or did they create me?"

People entice him, so he sneaks into the beds of lovers and finds love there. He sneaks into the beds of old people and finds age there. He sneaks into the beds of the dying and finds death there.

"Why not give it a try?" the Baron Popielski thought to himself. He went back to the very beginning of the book and arranged the brass figures in front of him.

The Time of Misha

Misha noticed that the light-haired boy from the Boskis would look at her in church. Then, when she would leave after mass, he would be standing outside so he could look at her more. Mish would feel his gaze like uncomfortable clothing. She was afraid to move freely, to breathe deeply. He was binding her.

It was like that the entire winter, from Christmas mass to Easter. When it started getting warmer, Misha would go to church every week dressed lighter, and she would feel Pavel Boski's gaze on her all the stronger. On Corpus Christi, that gaze touched her naked neck and uncovered shoulders. Misha felt that it was soft and pleasant, like the caress of a cat, like a small feather, like thistle down.

That Sunday, Pavel Boski went up to Misha and asked if he could walk her home. She agreed.

He talked the entire time, and what he said amazed her. He said that she was petite like an expensive Swiss watch. Before that, Misha had never thought of herself as petite. He said that her hair was the color of the finest gold. Misha had always thought

that her hair was brown. He also said that her skin smelled like vanilla. Misha did not tell him that she had just baked a cake.

Everything in Pavel Boski's words reinvented Misha. She came home and could not get any work done. However, she did not think of Pavel, but about herself: "I am a beautiful girl. I have small feet, like a Chinese woman. I have beautiful hair. I smile very womanly. I smell like vanilla. Someone might long to look at me. I am a woman."

Before vacation, Misha told her father that she would no longer be going to the teacher's school in Taszov, that she did not have the head for calculation and calligraphy. She was still friends with Rachel Szenbert, but now their conversations were different. They would walk together along the Highway to the forest. Rachel tried to persuade Misha not to quit school. She promised she would help her with arithmetic. But Misha told Rachel about Pavel Boski. Rachel listened like a good friend, but she was of a different opinion.

"I'm going to marry a doctor or somebody like that. And I'm not going to have any more than two children, so I don't ruin my figure."

"I'm only going to have a daughter."

"Misha, just wait until you get your diploma."

"I want to get married."

Misha went for a walk with Pavel along the same path. At the forest, they took each other's hand. Pavel's hand was big and warm, and Misha's was tiny and cold. They turned from the Highway onto one of the forest paths. Pavel stopped and pulled Misha to him with that large, strong hand.

He smelled of soap and the sun. Misha turned weak, submissive, and limp. The man in the white, starched shirt seemed enormous to her. She barely reached his chest. She stopped thinking. That was dangerous. She came too when her breasts were already naked, and Pavel's mouth was wandering about belly.

"No," she said.

"You have to marry me."

"I know."

"I'll ask for your hand."

"Good."

"When?"

"Not long."

"Will he agree? Will your father agree?"

"He has nothing to agree to. I want to marry you, and that's it."

"But . . ."

"I love you."

Misha straightened her hair and they went back onto the Highway as though they had never left it.

The Time of Michal

Michal did not like Pavel. He might have been handsome, but that was all. When Michal would look at his broad shoulders, his strong legs in breeches and gleaming jackboots, he felt painfully old and shrunken like a dried up apple.

Now, Pavel would come to see him all the time. He would sit at the table with his legs crossed. The dog Dolly, her tail bent, would sniff at his shined jackboots with dog skin tops. He would talk about the timber business he ran with Kozienicki, about the paramedic school that he was attending, about his big plans for the future. He would look at Genovefa and smile the entire time. Michal could see his straight, white teeth. Genovefa was delighted. Pavel would bring her small gifts. Blushing, she would put some flowers into a vase. The cellophane of the box of chocolates would rustle.

"How naïve women are," thought Michal.

He had the impression that his Misha had become a thing that Pavel Boski had written into his ambitious life plans with total calculation. She was an only daughter, practically an only child because Izydor did not really count, she would have a beautiful dowry, she was from the wealthiest family, she was so different, elegant, beautifully dressed, delicate.

Sometimes, Michal would remind his wife and daughter in passing about old Boski, who had said a hundred maybe two hundred words in his life and who always sat on the palace roof, or about Pavel's ugly, mediocre sisters.

"Old Boski is a good person," Genovefa would say.

"Anyway, the whole family isn't like that," Misha added and looked at Izydor meaningfully. "There's someone like that in every family."

Michal would pretend he was reading the newspaper when his dressed up daughter would go to dances with Pavel on Sunday afternoons. She would preen herself in front of the mirror for an hour. He would watch as she would put on her mother's eyebrow liner and delicately color her lips. He would see her as she stood sideways, checking the effect of the brassiere, as she would dab the violet perfume she had wanted for her seventeenth birthday behind her ears. He would not say anything as Genovefa and Izydor would watch her through the window.

"Pavel mentioned marriage to me. He said that he would already like to propose," Genovefa told him one Sunday.

Michal did not even want to listen to her finish.

"No. She's still too young. We'll send her to Kielce, to a better school than the one in Taszov."

"She doesn't even want to study. She wants to get married. Can't you see that?"

Michal shook his head.

"No, no, no. It's still too early. What does she need a man and children for? Let her live a little. Where will they live? Where will Pavel work? After all, he's still going to school too. No, they need to wait."

"Wait for what? Wait until they have to get married in a hurry?"

Then Michal imagined a house. He would build his daughter a big, comfortable house on good land. He would plant an orchard. He would equip the house with a cellar and a garden. He would build a house so grand that Misha would not have to leave. They could all live there together. There would be enough rooms in it for everyone, and the rooms' windows would look out onto the four corners of the world. It would be a

house with a foundation of sandstone and with walls of real brick that would be insulated on the outside with the best wood. It would have a ground floor, an upstairs, an attic, a cellar, a covered porch, and a balcony for Misha where she could watch the Corpus Christi procession walking across the fields. In this house, Misha would be able to have many children. There would be a maid, because Misha should have a maid.

The next day, he ate lunch early and walked around Longago in search of a place for the house. He thought about Beetle Mountain. He thought about the grasslands next to the White. The entire time, he calculated that building such a house would last at least three years, and that Misha's marriage would be put off for that long.

The Time of Florentynka

On Good Saturday, Florentynka got ready to go to church with one of her dogs to have her food blessed. She put a jar of the milk that fed her and her dogs into a basket, because that was all she had in the house. She covered the jar with fresh leaves of horseradish and periwinkles.

In Jeszkotle, the baskets with the Easter food were set to the side of the altar of Our Lady of Jeszkotle. It is women who should look after food, both its preparation and blessing. God, a man, has more important things on his mind, like wars, cataclysms, conquests, far away journeys. Women look after food.

So the people would take their baskets to the altar of Our Lady of Jeszkotle, and wait in the pews for the priest with the aspersorium. They each sat far from one another in silence, because a church on Good Saturday is dark and hollow like a cave, like a concrete air-raid shelter.

Florentynka went to the altar with her dog, who she called Goat. She set her basket among the others. In the other baskets there was kielbasa, cake, horseradish with cream, colorful Easter eggs, and white, beautifully baked bread. Oh, how hungry Florentynka was, and how hungry her dog was also.

Florentynka looked into the painting of Our Lady of Jeszkotle and saw a smile on her smooth face. Goat sniffed someone's basket and pulled a piece of kielbasa from it.

"So you just hang there, Holy Mother, and you smile, and the dogs eat up your gifts," Florentynka said quietly. "Sometimes, it's hard for people to understand dogs. You, Holy Mother, certainly understand animals just as you understand people. You probably even know the thoughts of the moon."

Florentynka sighed.

"I'm going to pray to your husband, and you can mind my dog."

She tied the dog to the railing in front of the amazing painting, among the baskets covered with doilies.

"I'll come back soon."

She found herself a space in the first row next to the dressed up women from Jeszkotle. They moved away from her, looking at one another knowingly.

Meanwhile, the sacristan, who kept the church in order, had walked up to the altar of Our Lady of Jeszkotle. First, he noticed something moving, but for a long time, his eyes could not make out what it was he was seeing. When he realized that a big, hideous, mangy dog was rummaging through the baskets before the blessing, he shook with outrage and his face grew red. He grabbed the leash and, with hands shaking from anger, undid the knot. Then, he heard a woman's quiet voice come from the painting:

"Leave the dog alone! He belongs to Florentynka of Longago."

The Time of the House

The foundation was dug in a square. Its sides were matched to the four sides of the world.

Michal, Pavel Boski, and the workers first put up the stone walls of the foundation, and then the wooden beams.

When they closed the cellar vaults, they started speaking of the place as "the house," but only after they had built the roof and crowned it with a perch did it become a house for good. A house only begins when its walls close a piece of space within itself. That enclosed space is the soul of the house.

They spent two years building the house. They closed the perch on the roof in the summer of 1936. They took pictures of themselves in front of the house.

The house had cellars. The one that had two windows was going to be a basement and, in the summer, the kitchen as well. The cellar with one window as meant for the laundry and for keeping potatoes. The third cellar had no windows at all. It was going to be a hiding place, just in case. Beneath this third cellar, Michal had a fourth cellar dug for ice and who-knows-what.

The ground floor was tall on the stone foundation. One entered the ground floor by stairs with a wooden balustrade. There were two entrances. The first was from the road, over the porch, and straight into the big living room through which one went to the other rooms. The second entrance led to the kitchen through a hall. The kitchen had a large window. Beneath the opposite wall stood the blue tiled kitchen oven that Misha

had chosen from Taszov. The oven was finished with brass fittings and racks. There were three doors in the kitchen. One led to the largest room, another beneath the stairs, and the third to a small room. The ground floor was a ring of rooms. If one were to open all the doors, one could walk in a circle.

The stairs led from the living room to the second story where the other four rooms waited to be finished.

Above all this, there was one more story, the attic. One got to it by way of a tight, wooden staircase. The attic fascinated little Izydor because it had windows to all four corners of the world.

On the outside, the house was covered with boards arranged like fish scales. That was old Boski's idea. Old Boski also laid the roof in the same beautiful was as the palace roof. Lilacs grew in front of the house. They had been growing there since before the house was built. Now its reflection was in the windows. They placed a bench beneath the lilac bush. People from Longago would stop there and wonder at the house. No one in the area had ever built such a beautiful house. The Baron Popielski also came by horse and patted Pavel Boski on the back. Pavel invited him to the wedding reception.

On Sunday, Michal went to the parish priest to have him bless the house. The priest stood on the porch and looked around with admiration.

"You've built your daughter a beautiful home," he said.

Michal shrugged his shoulders.

Finally, they began moving in the furniture. Old Boski had built most of it, but some pieces had been brought from Kielce by wagon. There was a tall grandfather clock, a cupboard and a round oak table with sculpted legs.

Misha was sad when she looked at the area around the house. The flat, gray ground was covered with dry grass like the kind that grows on infertile land. So Michal bought Misha some trees, and in the space of a day he had planted something around the house that would one day be an orchard. Pear trees, plum trees and walnut trees, and in the very center of the orchard he planted twin apple trees, the fruit that had tempted Eve.

The Time of Missus Parrot

Stasha Parrot was left alone with her father after her mother died, her sisters got married, and Pavel married Misha.

It was difficult living with old Boski. He was always unhappy and impetuous. When she was late with lunch, he would hit her with something heavy. Then Stasha would walk into the currant bushes and cry. She would try to cry quietly so she would not anger her father any more.

When Boski found out from his son that Michal Niebieski had bought some land by the house for his daughter, he could not go to sleep. A few days later he dug out all his savings and also bought some land, right next to Michal's.

He decided to build a house there for Stasha. He thought about it for a long time while sitting on the palace roof. "Why can Michal Niebieski build his daughter a house, and I, Boski, can't?" he pondered. "Why couldn't I also build a house?"

And Boski started to build a house.

He marked out a square in the ground with a stick, and the next day, he began digging the foundations. The Baron Popielski gave him some time off. That was the first vacation in Boski's life. Then, from around the area, Boski gathered some large stones

and some smaller stones. He also gathered some white pieces of limestone that he placed evenly into the dug out hole. That lasted a month. Pavel came to his father and lamented the hole.

"What are you doing, papa? Where did you get the money? Don't make a fool of yourself, papa, by building a chicken coop right under my nose."

"What? Are you blind? I'm building your sister a house."

Pavel knew that it would be impossible to convince his father, so he finally brought him a wagon of boards.

Now, the houses were growing almost parallel. One was big and evenly built, with big windows and spacious rooms. The second was small, stooped close to the ground, with tiny windows. One stood on an open space, against the backdrop of the forest and the River. The second was squeezed into a wedge between the Highway and the Volska Road, hidden in the currant bushes and wild lilacs.

While Boski was busy with building the house, Stasha had more peace. She had to feed the animals by noon and then start lunch. First, she would go to the field and dig out some potatoes. She would daydream about finding treasure beneath the bushes, jewels wrapped in a cloth, or a can full of dollars. Later, as she was peeling the small potatoes, she would imagine that she was a heeler, and the potatoes were sick people who had come to her. She would take away their illnesses and clean their bodies of all evil. Then she would throw the peeled potatoes into some boiling water and imagine that she was brewing an elixir for beauty, and that when she drank, her life would change once and for all. Some doctor or lawyer from Kielce would see her from the Highway and he would shower he with presents and love her like a princess.

That was why cooking lunch took so long.

Imagining is, in fact, creating. It is a bridge of reconciliation between matter and spirit, especially when it is done often and intensely. Then the image transforms into a drop of matter and plugs into the flow of life. Sometimes, along the way, something within it becomes disfigured and it changes. So all human desires, if they are strong enough, become fulfilled. Not always as completely as was expected though.

Once, when Stasha was dumping dirty water in front of the house, she saw a strange man, and it was exactly as it had been in her fantasies. He came up to her and asked about the Kielce Road, and she answered. A few hours later, on his way back, he met Stasha again. This time she had a yoke over her shoulders. He helped her and they talked some more. He was not a lawyer or a doctor, but a postal worker who was working on putting telephone lines up from Kielce to Taszov. He seemed happy and sure of himself to Stasha. They made a date to take a walk on Wednesday and to go to a dance on Saturday. It was strange that old Boski even liked him. The newcomer was named Parrot.

From that day, Stasha's life began to proceed differently. Stasha bloomed. She would go to Jeszkotle and shop at Szenberts', and everyone would see her as Parrot drove her in his carriage. In the autumn of 1937, Stasha got pregnant and they got married around Christmas. She became Missus Parrot. A modest wedding reception took place in the only room of the freshly finished house. The next day, old Boski built a wooden partition across the room, dividing the house into two halves.

In the summer Stasha gave birth to a son. The phone line was already far beyond the borders of Longago. Parrot would only come home on Sundays. He was tired and

demanding. His wife's affections annoyed him. He would get angry that he had to wait so long for lunch. Then, he started coming home only every other Sunday, and he did not show up at all for All Saints' Day. He said that he had to visit his parents' graves, and Stasha believed him.

As she was waiting for him with the Christmas Eve dinner, she saw her reflection in the windowpane, which the night had turned into a mirror. Then she understood that Parrot had left forever.

The Time of Misha's Angel

As Misha was giving birth to her first child, the angel showed her Jerusalem.

Misha was lying in bed in the bedroom on white bed sheets, in a smell of floors scrubbed with lye, separated from the sun by wool curtains painted with lilies. The doctor from Jeszkotle was there, and the nurse, and Genovefa, and Pavel, who was continuously sterilizing all the tools, and the angel, who no one could see.

Everything was getting mixed up in Misha's head. She was tired. The pains came on suddenly, and she could not cope with them. She would fall asleep, half-sleep, in waking dreams. It seemed that she was as tiny as a grain of coffee, and that she was falling into the funnel of a coffee mill as huge as a palace. She was falling into a black abyss, into the cogs of a grinding machine. It hurt. Her body was turning into dust.

The angel saw Misha's thoughts and felt sorry for her body, even though he did not really understand what pain was. So for a moment, he took Misha's soul to an entirely different place. He showed her Jerusalem.

Misha saw a fallow desert with enormous stretches that heaved as if they were moving. In this sea of sand, in a gentle valley, there was a city. It was round. It was surrounded with walls in which four gates were located. The first gate was Milk, the second Honey, the third Wine, and the fourth Olive. One road lead through each gate. Oxen were driven along the first road, lions along the second, hawks were carried along the third, and people walked along the fourth. Misha found herself in the center of the city, where the Savior's house stood on the paved market square. She stood in front of his door.

Someone knocked from the inside of the door. Surprised, Misha asked: "Who's there?" "It's me," answered a voice. "Come out," she responded. The Lord Jesus walked out to her and held her to his chest. Misha could smell the linen he was wearing. She nestled into the linen shirt and felt how much she was loved. The Lord Jesus and the entire world loved her.

But Misha's angel, who was constantly watching over everything, took her from the arms of the Lord Jesus, and threw her back into her own body that was giving birth. Misha sighed and gave birth to a son.

The Time of Kloska

During the first full moon of the autumn, Kloska would dig up the roots of different herbs, such as soapwort, comfrey, coriander, chicory, and althea. Many of them would grow by the ponds in Longago. Kloska would take her daughter, and they would go at night through the forest and village.

Once, as they were passing Beetle Mountain, they saw a bent, female figure surrounded by dogs. The silver glimmer of the moon whitened the tops of all of their heads.

Kloska started walking toward the woman, pulling Ruta after. They walked up to the old woman. The dogs growled uneasily.

"Florentynka," Kloska said quietly.

The woman turned her face towards them. Her eyes were colorless as though they had been washed out. Her face resembled a withered apple. A thin, gray braid lay on her skinny back.

They sat on the ground next to the old woman. They all watched the big, round, contented face of the moon.

"He took my children. He fooled my old man, and now he's made me crazy," complained Florentynka.

Kloska sighed heavily and looked into the face of the moon.

One of the Dogsons suddenly howled.

"I had a dream," Kloska said. "The moon knocked at my window and said: 'You have no mother, Kloska, and your daughter has no grandmother, right?' 'Right,' I said. And he replied, 'In the village, there is a good, lonely woman who I hurt some time ago. I no longer remember why. She has no children or grandchildren. Go to her and tell her to forgive me. I am old and my mind is weak.' That's what he said. He also said, 'You'll find her on the Mountain. She curses me there when I show all of myself to the world every month.' Then I asked him, 'Why do you want her to forgive you? What do you need the forgiveness of some human for?' And he replied, 'Because human suffering

gouges dark wrinkles into my face. One day I will burn out from human pain.' That's what he told me, so I came her."

Florentynka looked deeply into Kloska's eyes.

"Is that true?"

"It's true. It's the honest truth."

"He wanted me to forgive him?"

"Yes."

"And for you to become my daughter, and for her to be my granddaughter?"

"That's what he told me."

Florentynka lifted her face to the sky and something flashed in her pale eyes.

"Granny, what's that big dog's name?" little Ruta asked.

Florentynka blinked her eyes.

"Goat."

"Goat?"

"Yes. Pet him."

Ruta carefully stretched out her hand and laid it on the dog's head.

"That's my cousin. He's very wise," said Florentynka, and Kloska saw that tears were flowing down her wrinkled cheeks.

"The moon is just the sun's mask. He puts it on when he goes out at night to watch over the world. The moon has a short memory. He doesn't remember what happened a month ago. He gets confused. Forgive him, Florentynka."

Florentynka sighed deeply.

"I forgive him. Both he and I are old. What should we fight for?" she said quietly. "I forgive you, you old idiot!" she yelled into the sky.

Kloska laughed. She started laughing louder and louder until the Dogsons awoke from their dreams and jumped to their feet. Florentynka also laughed. She stood up and lifted her outstretched arms to the sky.

"I forgive you, moon. I forgive all the wrongs you've done me!" she yelled in a strong, piercing voice.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a breeze came up from the Black and blew through the old woman's gray hair. In one of the houses, a light came on and a man's voice yelled:

"Quiet, woman! We want to sleep."

"Then sleep, sleep 'til you die!" Kloska yelled back over her shoulder. "Why were you born if you just sleep now?"

The Time of Ruta

"Don't go to the village. You'll get into trouble," Kloska said to her daughter. "Sometimes, I think they're all drunk over there. They're so heavy and slow. They only liven up when something bad happens."

But Longago fascinated Ruta. There was a mill there and a miller with his wife. There were poor farmhands. There was Cherub, who pulled out teeth with pliers. Children like her ran about. At least they looked like her. And there were houses with green shutters, and there were white bed sheets, the whitest things in Ruta's world, drying on the fences.

When she would go through the village with her mother, Ruta could feel everyone watching them. The women would shade their eyes with their hands and the men would furtively spit. Her mother never paid any attention to it, but Ruta was afraid of their looks. She would try to walk as close to her mother as possible, tightly squeezing her big hand.

In the summer evenings, when the bad people would already be sitting in their houses, taking care of their affairs, Ruta liked to walk to the edge of the village and watch the gray lumps of the cottages and the bright smoke from the chimneys. Then, when she got a little older, she became bold enough to walk quietly up to the very windows and look inside. At the Seraphims' there were always small children crawling along the floor. Ruta could watch them for hours, watch as they would stop above a piece of wood, taste it with their tongues and play with it in their plump little hands. She would watch as they put various objects into their mouths and sucked on them as if they were sugar, or as they waddled under the table and stared at the wooden, table sky in amazement.

Finally, the people would put the children in bed and Ruta would examine the things they collected, like dishes, pots, cutlery, curtains, pictures of saints, clocks, tapestries, house plants, framed photos, patterned plastic tablecloths, bedspreads, baskets, all the tiny objects that make peoples' houses unique. She knew all the objects in the village and she knew to whom they belonged. Florentynka was the only person who had white mesh curtains. The Malaks had a set of nickel-plated cutlery. The young Missus Cherub crocheted beautiful pillows. A large painting of Jesus teaching from a boat hung in the Seraphims' house. Only the Boskis had green bedspreads with roses, and then,

when their house next to the forest was almost ready, they began bringing real treasures into it.

Ruta took a liking to that house. It was the biggest and most beautiful. It had a steep sloping roof with a lightning rod and windows in the roof. It had a real balcony and glass porch. There was also a second entrance through the kitchen. Ruta furnished herself with a sitting place in a big lilac bush, from where she would observe the Boskis' house in the evenings. She watched as the new, soft carpet was laid in the largest room. It was as gorgeous as the undergrowth of the autumn forest. She was sitting in the lilacs when hey brought in the huge grandfather clock, whose heart swung from one side to the other, measuring time. The clock must have been a living being since it moved on its own. She saw the toys of the little boy, Misha's first son, and the cradle that they had bought for the next child.

Only after she had acquainted herself with everything, with the smallest object in the Boskis' new home, did she turn her attention to the boy who was her own age. The lilac bush was two short for her to see what the boy was doing in his room in the attic. She knew that this was Izydor and that he was not like the other children. She did not know if that was good or bad. He had a big head and a mouth that could not close, and spit would trickle from it onto his chin. He was tall and thin like the reeds in a pond.

One evening, Izydor grabbed Ruta's leg as she was sitting in the lilacs. She tore free of him and ran away. A few days later, she came back and he was waiting for her. She made a space for him next to her in the branches. They sat there the entire evening and did not say a single word. Izydor watched his new home live. He saw people moving their mouths but could not hear what they were saying. He saw their chaotic

wanderings from one room to the next and to the kitchen, and to the pantry. He saw Antosh's silent crying.

Ruta and Izydor both enjoyed sitting in the tree silently.

They began meeting there every day. They would vanish from people's sight. They would go through the hole in the fence to the Malaks' field and walk along the Volska Road toward the forest. On the shoulder of the road, Ruta would pick plants like carob, goosefoot, oregano, and sorrel. She would put them under Izydor's nose so he could smell them.

"This you can eat. And this you can eat. You can eat this too."

They watched the Black from the road, a shining crack in the very middle of the green valley. They passed a dark copse of trees that smelled of mushrooms, and then went into the forest.

"Let's not go too far," Izydor would protest in the beginning, but later he completely gave in to Ruta.

It was always warm and soft in the forest, like in the velvet lined box where Michal's medal lay. Wherever one would lie, the forest floor, covered with pine needles, would be soft and create a hollow, ideally fitted to the body. Up above was the sky, overgrown with the tops of pine trees. It was fragrant there.

Ruta had a lot of ideas. They would play hide-and-seek, and tag. They would pretend to be trees. They would arrange sticks into different figures, sometimes small, sometimes large, taking up a big space of the forest. In the summer, they would find entire glades full of yellow mushrooms and watch the static mushroom families.

Ruta loved mushrooms more than plants and animals. She said that the real kingdom of mushrooms was beneath the ground, where the sun could not go. She said that on the surface of the Earth, the only mushrooms that grew were those that had been condemned to death or banished from the kingdom. Here, they died from the sun, at the hands of humans, or by being trampled by animals. The true subterranean mushroom, the mycelium, is immortal.

In autumn, Ruta's eyes became yellow and penetrating like a bird's. She would hunt for mushrooms. She would say less than usual. She seemed absent to Izydor. She knew in which places the mycelium came onto the Earth's surface, where it would stretch its tentacles out into the world. When she would find a king bolete, or a birch bolete, she would lie next to it on the ground and look at it for a long time before she let herself pull it out. But Ruta loved toadstools the most. She knew about all their favorite clearings. The most toadstools were in the little birch forest on the other side of the Highway. That year, when God's presence was felt especially clearly in all of Longago, the toadstools appeared as early as the beginning of July. They overgrew the birch clearings with their red caps. Ruta would jump around them, but carefully, so as not to ruin them. Then she would lie among them and look up at their red dresses.

"Be careful, those are poisonous," Izydor warned her, but Ruta laughed.

She showed Izydor the various toadstools, not just the red ones, but the white and green, or the kind that pretended to be either champignions or other different mushrooms.

"My mother eats them."

"You're lying. Their deathly poisonous," Izydor said stubbornly.

"They don't hurt my mother. I'll also be able to eat them."

"Fine, fine. Watch out for the white ones. They're the worst."

Ruta's courage impressed Izydor. But just looking at mushrooms was not enough for him. He wanted to know something about them. In one of Misha's cookbooks, he found an entire chapter devoted to mushrooms. On one page there were drawings of edible mushrooms, and on another there were inedible and poisonous mushrooms. He hid the book under his sweater, took it to the forest, and showed Ruta the drawings. She did not believe him.

"Read what's written here," she said, pointing to the writing under a toadstool.

"*Amanita muscaria.* Red Toadstool."

"How do you know that that's what's written there?"

"I put the letters together."

"What letter is that?"

"A."

"A? Nothing more? Just a?"

"This is an m."

"M."

"And this, like a half m, is an n."

"Teach me to read, Izzy."

So Izydor taught Ruta to read, first from Misha's cookbook, then he brought an old calendar. Ruta quickly caught onto learning, but she also got bored quickly. By autumn, Izydor had taught Ruta almost as much as he knew.

Once, as he was waiting for her, looking through the calendar, a large shadow fell over the white page. Izydor lifted his head and was terrified. Behind Ruta stood her mother. She was barefoot and big.

"Don't be scared. I know you very well," She said.

Izydor did not reply.

"You're a smart boy." She knelt down beside him and touched his head. "You have a good heart. You'll go far in your travels."

With a confident movement, she pulled him to herself and pressed him to her chest. Izydor was paralyzed either by stupor or fear. He stopped thinking, as though he had fallen asleep.

Then, Ruta's mother left. Ruta poked a stick into the ground.

"She likes you. She always asks about you."

"She asks about me?"

"You have no idea how strong she is. She can pick up huge stones."

"No woman can be stronger than a man." Izydor had finally come to.

"She knows all the secrets."

"If she were the way you say, you wouldn't be living in a wrecked shack in the forest, but in Jeszkotle instead, on the market square. She would walk in shoes and dresses. She'd have hats and rings. Then she'd really be important."

Ruta lowered her head.

"I'll show you something, even though it's a secret."

They went around Blowing Hill, passing a young oak forest, and then through a copse of birches. Izydor had never been there before. They must have been very far from home.

Suddenly, Ruta stopped.

"It's here."

Surprised, Izydor looked around. There were birches growing here. The wind rustled their slender leaves.

"This is the border of Longago," Ruta said, stretching her arm in front of her.

Izydor did not understand.

"Here is where Longago ends, there is nothing further on."

"What do you mean, nothing? What about Vola, and Taszov, and Kielce? Somewhere here should be the road to Kielce."

"There is no Kielce, and Vola and Taszov are in Longago. Here, everything ends."

Izydor laughed and twirled around.

"What kind of nonsense are you talking? People go to Kielce, you know? My father goes to Kielce. They brought Misha's furniture from Kielce. Pavel was in Kielce. My father was in Russia."

"It only seemed like that to them. They leave on a trip, arrive at the border, and here they stop moving. Maybe they dream that they're going farther, that there is a Kielce and Russia. They stand on the road to Kielce. They're motionless. Their eyes stay open and they look terrible. Like they're dead. Then, after some time, they wake up and return and they take their dreams for memories of their trip. That's how it all looks."

"Now I'll show you!" Izydor yelled.

He stepped back a few paces and started running to the place where, according to Ruta, there was a border. Then he suddenly stopped. He did not even know why. Something was not right there. He reached his arms out and the tips of his fingers disappeared.

It seemed to Izydor that he was splitting into two different boys. One stood stretching out his arm, which was missing the tips of its fingers. The second boy was next to him. He neither knew the first boy nor the second one who was missing his fingers. Izydor was two boys at the same time.

"Izydor," Ruta said. "Let's go back."

He woke up and put his hands in his pockets. His doubleness slowly disappeared. They started back.

"This border goes from Taszov, past Vola, and behind Kotuszov. But no one knows exactly. This border knows how to give birth to ready-made people, and it seems to us that they have come from somewhere. What scares me the most is that you can't leave. Like sitting in a pot."

Izydor did not talk the entire way home. Only when they got onto the Highway did he say:

"We could pack up a backpack, take some food, and walk the length of the border to examine it. Maybe there's a hole somewhere."

Ruta jumped over an anthill and went back to the forest.

"Don't worry, Izzy. What do we need a different world for?"

Izydor watched as her dress flashed between the trees, and then the girl disappeared.

The Time of God

It is strange that though God is outside of time, he manifests himself in time and in his transformations. If one does not know "where" God is, and people sometimes ask such questions, one must look at everything that changes and moves, everything that is not located in form, everything that rolls in waves and vanishes. One must look on the surface of the sea, in the dance of the sun's corona, in earthquakes, in the drift of continents, in the melting of snow, in the paths of glaciers, on the rivers that flow to the sea, in sprouting seeds, in the wind that sculpts mountains, in the growth of a fetus in a mother's stomach, in the wrinkles in the corners of a person's eyes, in the decay of a body in a grave, in the aging of wine, on mushrooms growing after rain.

God is in every process. God pulsates in changes. Once he is, once he is less, but sometimes he is not at all. Because God also manifests himself in that which is not.

People, who are, after all, a process, are afraid of what is unstable and always changing. They thought up something that does not exist, permanence, decreeing that what is eternal and permanent is perfect. They attributed permanence to God, and thus lost the ability to understand him.

In the summer of 1939, God was in everything around, and so unusual, rare things began happening.

At the beginning time, God created everything possible, though he himself is a God of impossible things that either never happen or only happen very rarely.

God manifested himself in the blueberries that ripened in front of Kloska's house. They were the size of plums. Kloska picked the ripest one, polished its blue skin with a kerchief, and saw in its shining surface another world. The sky within it was dark, almost black. The sun was far away and hidden by clouds. The forests looked like clusters of sticks driven into the ground. And the Earth was drunk and wobbly, suffering from the holes in it. The people were falling off of it into a black chasm. Kloska ate this sinister blueberry and tasted its tart flavor on her tongue. She understood that she would have to store up for winter more than she had ever before.

Now every morning, Kloska would get Ruta out of bed at dawn, and together they would walk to the forest and carry out all kinds of riches from it. They would gather baskets of mushrooms, cans of wild strawberries and blueberries, young hazelnuts, barberries, black cherries, cranberries, cornelian cherries, honeysuckle, rosehip, and buckthorn berries. They would dry their stores for whole days in the sun and in the shadows, and they would uneasily watch to see whether the sun was shining the way it had before.

God also disturbed Kloska bodily. He was present in her breasts, which suddenly and miraculously filled with milk. When people found out about it, they would furtively come to Kloska. They would place parts of their body that were ill beneath her nipple, and she would spray a white stream of milk onto them. The milk healed young Kransy's swollen eyes, the warts on Franek Seraphim's hands, Florentynka's ulcer, and the lichen of a Jewish child from Jeszkotle.

All the people she healed were lost in the war. That is how God manifests himself.

The Time of the Baron Popielski

God appeared to the Baron Popielski through the Game that the rabbi had given him. The Baron tried to start several times, but it was difficult to understand the commands. He would pull out the book and read the instructions until he had memorized them. To begin the Game one first had to roll a one; however, the Baron kept rolling an eight. It was contradictory to all the rules of probability. The Baron thought that he had been cheated. The strange eight-sided die could have been rigged. But, wanting to play honestly, he had to wait until the next day to roll again. Those were the Game's rules. And again he was unable to do it. That lasted the entire spring. The disappointed Baron grew impatient. In the turbulent summer of 1939, he finally rolled the stubborn one and the Baron Popielski sighed with relief. The Game had begun.

Now he needed a lot of peace and free time. The Game was absorbing. It demanded concentration, even on a day when he did not play. In the evenings, he would lock himself up in the library, lay out the board, and caress the eight-sided die for a long time. Or he would carry out the Game's commands. It bothered him that he was losing so much time, but he could not stop.

"There's going to be a war," his wife said.

"In the civilized world, there is no war," he answered.

"Maybe in the civilized world there really isn't. But there's going to be a war here. The Pelskis are going to America."

The Baron Popielski grew uneasy at the mention of the word "America," but nothing had the same meaning it had before then. Before the Game.

In August, the Baron had to report for the draft. However, he was released on account of his state of health. In September, they were listening to the radio before it started to speak in German. That night, the Baroness buried the silver in the park. The Baron sat at the Game all night.

"They didn't even put up a fight. They went back home. Pavel Boski didn't even get a gun," the Baroness cried. "We've lost, Felix."

He nodded his head inattentively.

"Felix, we've lost the war!"

"Give me some peace," he said and went to the library.

Every day, the Game would uncover something new before his eyes, something he had not known, had not felt. How was that possible?

One of the first commands was to dream. In order to move onto the next square, the Baron had to dream that he was a dog. "How odd," he thought with distaste. But he lay down in bed and thought about dogs and that he himself could be a dog. In these visions before falling asleep he imagined himself as a dog, a hound, hunting waterfowl and running about in meadows. But at night, his dreams did what they wanted. It was difficult to cease being a human in them. He made some progress in a dream he had about ponds. The Baron Popielski dreamed that he was an olive carp. He was swimming in green water where the sun was just a blurry light. He had no wife, no palace, nothing belonged to him and he cared about nothing. It was a beautiful dream.

That day, when the Germans appeared at the palace, the Baron finally dreamed that he was a dog. He was running about the market square in Jeszkotle, looking for something, but he did not know what. Under the Szenberts' store he dug up some apple

cores and scraps of meat and ate them with relish. He sniffed at horse manure and human feces behind bushes. Fresh blood smelled like ambrosia.

The Baron awoke surprised. "That was irrational and absurd," he thought. But he was pleased that the Game could proceed further.

The Germans were very polite. There was a Captain Gropius and one other. The Baron met them in front of his home. He tried to keep his distance.

"I understand sir," the sour faced Captain Gropius commented. "Unfortunately, we stand before you as invaders, occupiers. However, we are civilized people."

They wanted to buy a lot of wood. The Baron Popielski said he would take care of supplying the wood, but in the depths of his soul, he had no desire to separate himself from his Game. With that the conversation between the occupiers and the occupied ended. The Baron returned to the Game. He was pleased that he was now a dog and that now he could move onto the next square.

The next night, the Baron dreamt that he was reading the instructions to the Game. The words jumped about in front of his sleeping vision because that part of the Baron that dreamt was not skilled at reading.

> A young God created the Second World. He was still inexperienced, so everything in the world was colorless and indistinct and things disintegrated into dust quite fast. War lasted forever. People were born, they loved desperately and died with a sudden death that was everywhere. And the more suffering life brought them, the more they desired to live.

Longago did not exist. It had not even been thought up since, throughout the Earth, wherever someone could have put it, ravenous armies were constantly coming out of the east towards the west. Nothing had a name. The Earth was full of holes from bombs. Both rivers, sick and wounded, flowed with muddy water and it was difficult to differentiate between the two. Stones crumbled into pieces between the fingers of hungry children.

In this world, Cain met Abel in the field and said: "There are no laws or judges! There are no other worlds. There is no reward fom the just or punishment for the wicked. This world was not created in grace. It is not ruled with sympathy. After all, why are your sacrifices accepted and mine rejected? What would God need a dead lamb for anyway?" Abel answered: "He accepted mine because I love God. Yours was rejected because you hate him. People like you should not even exist." And Abel killed Cain.

The Time of Kurt

Kurt saw Longago from the truck that had brought the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. For Kurt, Longago was no different than the other villages he had passed in this foreign, enemy country. The villages here were not that different from those he knew from vacations. They might have had narrower streets, poorer houses, funny crooked fences, and white walls. Kurt did not like villages. He came from a big city and he missed it. He had left his wife and daughter there.

They did not try to take up quarters in the peasants' houses. They commandeered the Cherubs' orchard and began building themselves wooden barracks. In one of them there would be a kitchen that Kurt would administer. Captain Gropius took him by jeep to Jeszkotle and the palace, to Kotuszov and the surrounding villages. They bought trees, cows and eggs for prices that they determined. They were very low prices, or sometimes, they did not pay at all. Then Kurt saw this beaten, enemy country close up. He stood face to face with it. He saw baskets of eggs with traces of chicken excrement on the white shells, and the sinister, unfriendly looks of the peasants. He saw the ungainly, scrawny cows and wondered at the affection they were given. He saw the hens scratching and pecking at the piles of manure, the apples dried in haylofts, the round loaves of bread baked once a month, the blue-eyed, barefooted children whose shrill voices reminded him of his daughter. But everything was foreign. Maybe it was the primitive, crude language they spoke, or maybe the strangeness of their facial features. Sometimes, it seemed to Kurt that Captain Gropius was right when he would way, with a sigh, that the entire country should be leveled to the ground and a new order built in its place. It would be cleaner and prettier. Other times, he would get a nagging feeling that he should just go home and leave this stretch of sandy land, and these people, and the cows and baskets of eggs in peace. At night, he would dream about the light, smooth body of his wife, and everything in that dream would smell familiar, safe, and completely different from here.

"Look, Kurt," Captain Gropius said as they were going on their next trip for supplies. "Look at how big a work force is here, how much space, how much land. Kurt, look at these big rivers. We could set up hydroelectric power plants in place of these

primitive mills. We could set up electric lines, build factories and finally get them to work. Look at them, Kurt, they're not all that bad. I even like the Slav. Did you know that the name of their race comes from the Latin *sclavus*, which means 'servant?' This nation has servility in its blood."

Kurt was not listening. He missed home.

They took everything they could get their hands on. Sometimes, when they would go into a house, Kurt had the impression that the people had just finished hiding their food a moment before. Then Captain Gropius would pull out his pistol and angrily yell:

"We are confiscating this for the needs of the Wehrmacht!"

Kurt always felt like a thief in those moments.

In the evening, he would pray: "That I will not have to go any farther east. That I can stay here and go home by the same road. That the war will end."

Kurt slowly became accustomed to this foreign land. He came to know, more or less, where a certain farmer lived and even acquired a taste for their bizarre names, just as he had acquired a taste for the carp there. Since he liked animals, he had all the scraps from the kitchen thrown into the yard of their neighbor, an old, thin woman who had several gaunt dogs. After a while the old woman would silently smile toothlessly at him in greeting. Children from the new house next to the forest would also come to him. The boy was a little older than the girl. They both had light hair, almost white, like his daughter. The girl would lift her plump hand and faintly say:

"Hi hitla!"

Kurt would give them candy. The soldiers who were on guard would smile.

At the beginning of 1943, Captain Gropius was sent to the eastern front. He had apparently not prayed in the evenings. Kurt was promoted, but it did not please him. Promotion was dangerous now as it carried him farther from home. It was getting more and more difficult to obtain supplies. Every day, Kurt would go through the surrounding villages with a unit of men. In the voice of Captain Gropius, he would say:

"We are confiscating this for the needs of the Wehrmacht!" and he would take what there was to take.

His men would help the SS unit in the pacification of the Jews from Jeszkotle. Kurt supervised loading the truck. He felt bad for them, though he knew that they were going to a better place. He hated looking for Jewish runaways in the cellars and attics, hunting the women insane with fear in the meadows, tearing their children out of their hands. He ordered his men to shoot at them because there was no other way. He even shot, not wanting to weasel his way out of it. He preferred not to brood over it. After all, this was war. In the evenings, he would pray: "That I won't have to leave here for the east. That I'll survive until the end of the war. Oh! God, make sure they don't send me to the eastern front." And God heard his prayers.

In the spring of 1944, Kurt was ordered to move everything to Kotuszov, one village farther west, one village closer to home. They were saying that the Bolsheviks were coming, even though Kurt could not believe it. Then, after everything had been packed into the truck, Kurt survived a Russian air raid. They bombed the German garrisons on Taszov. A few bombs landed in the ponds. One hit the barn that belonged to the old woman with the dogs. The crazed dogs began running all over Beetle Mountain. Kurt's soldiers began shooting at them. Kurt did not try to stop them. It was

not they who were shooting. It was their fear in a foreign country and their yearning for home. Their fear of death was shooting. The dogs, enraged with fear, attacked the truck with all their might, biting the rubber tires. The soldiers aimed straight between their eyes. The strength of the shots threw the dogs' bodies back so hard it looked like they were turning summersaults. In the slow motion summersaults, their dark blood splattered all over. Kurt saw the familiar old woman run from her house and try to pull the living dogs away. She took the wounded ones into the orchard. Her gray apron suddenly turned red. She screamed something that Kurt could not understand. As the commanding officer, he should have stopped the shooting, but a sudden thought overwhelmed him, that he was witnessing the end of the world and that he belonged to the angels that had to cleanse the world of filth and sin, that something had to end so that something new could begin, that it was terrible, but that it had to be, that there was no turning back from this, that this world had been condemned to death.

Then Kurt shot the old woman who had always toothlessly smiled at him in silent greeting.

The army from the entire area assembled in Kotuszov. It was busy with salvaging the buildings that had been bombed and with building observation towers. Now, Kurt's assignment was to observe Longago. Thanks to this, Kurt was still in Longago.

Now from a safe distance, over the forest line and rivers, he saw Longago as a settlement of scattered houses. He also saw the new house where the light-haired children lived.

In late summer, Kurt saw the Bolsheviks through his binoculars. Their automobiles, the size of peas, were ominously coming near in absolute silence. An

uncountable number of soldiers, the size of poppy seeds, poured out of the trucks. It seemed to Kurt that it was an invasion of small, deadly insects. He trembled.

From August to January of the following year, he would look at Longago a few times a day. Over that time, he got to recognize every tree, every path, and every house. He saw the linden trees on the Highway and Beetle Mountain, and the meadows, and the forest. He watched as the people left the village in wagons and disappeared behind the wall of the forest. He saw the individual, evening thieves, similar from a distance to werewolves. He watched, day after day, hour after hour, as the Bolsheviks gathered a larger and larger number of troops and gear. Sometimes, they would shoot at one another, not to hurt each other, the time for that had not yet come, but to remind each other why they were there.

After sunset, he would draw maps and put Longago onto paper. He liked doing this because, amazingly, he started to miss Longago. He even thought that, after he had cleansed the world of all this mess, he could bring his two women and settle here, raising carp, and running the mill.

Because God read Kurt like a map and would grant his wishes, he allowed him to remain in Longago forever. He assigned Kurt one of those random spheres about which people say were sent by God.

Before the people of Longago ventured to bury the corpses from the January offensive, spring had come on, and so no one recognized Kurt in among the rotting corpses of the German soldiers. They buried him in a forest of alder trees next to the Priest's fields. He lies there today.

The Time of Genovefa

Genovefa was washing her linen in the Black. Her hands were shaking from the cold. She lifted them up to the sun. Through her fingers, she could see Jeszkotle. She saw four army trucks passing by the chapel of Saint Roch and go into the market square. Then they disappeared behind the chestnut trees next to the church. When she plunged her hands back into the water, she heard shots. The river current pulled the sheet out of her hand. The individual shots changed into a clattering and Genovefa's heart started to beat hard. She ran along the bank, chasing after the white linen flowing down the river listlessly until it disappeared behind the bend in the river.

There was a cloud of smoke above Jeszkotle. Genovefa helplessly stood in place. She was equally distant from home, from the bucket with the laundry, and to the burning Jeszkotle. She thought about Misha and the children. Her mouth went dry as she ran for the bucket.

"Oh, Our Lady of Jeszkotle! Oh, Our Lady of Jeszkotle!" she repeated several times and looked in despair at the church on the other side of the river. It was standing as before.

The trucks drove into the pastures. Soldiers got out of one and formed a line. Then the next appeared, waving a canvas tarp. A column of people appeared from the shadows of the chestnut trees. They were running, stumbling over themselves then getting back up. They were carrying suitcases with them. The soldiers pushed the people into the trucks. It happened so fast that Genovefa did not understand what she had just seen. She lifted her hand to shade the sun from her eyes. Only then did she see old Szlom in his unfastened gabardine, the light-haired children of the Gercs' and Kindels',

Missus Szenbert in her blue dress, her daughter with a baby in her arms, and the small rabbi. She also distinctly saw Eli holding his son's hand. There was some confusion and the soldiers stopped the column of people. The people began running in all directions and those who were in the trucks started jumping out of them. Genovefa saw rifle fire out the corner of her eye and was then deafened by the noise of machine guns. The figure of a man who she was watching staggered and fell like all the others. Genovefa dropped the bucket and walked into the river. The current tugged at her skirt and pulled her legs. The machine guns quieted as though they had gotten tired.

When Genovefa reached the other bank of the Black, one of the loaded trucks was on its way to the road. People were quietly getting into the other one. She saw them helping each other. One of the soldiers was finishing off the wounded with single shots. The second truck started off.

A figure jumped up from the ground and tried to run for the river. Genovefa immediately saw that it was Rachel Szenbert, Misha's friend. She was holding a baby in her arms. One of the soldiers knelt and slowly took aim at the girl. She clumsily tried to zigzag. The soldier shot and Rachel stopped. She swayed for a moment and then fell. Genovefa watched as the soldier ran up to her and turned her over with his foot. Then he shot into the white swaddling and went back to the trucks.

Genovefa's legs went out from under her and she had to kneel down.

When the trucks left she stood up with difficulty and started walking across the field. Her legs were heavy as stone and did not want to listen to her. Her wet skirt was dragging her to the ground.

Eli was lying nestled in the grass. For the first time in many years, Genovefa saw him up close. She sat next to him, and she never again stood up on her own legs.

The Time of the Szenberts

The next night, Michal woke Pavel and they went somewhere together. Misha could not get back to sleep. It seemed to her that she was hearing shots, distant, lonely, and ominous. Her mother was lying motionless in bed with her eyes open. Misha checked whether she was breathing.

In the morning, the men came back with some people. They led them to the cellar and locked it.

"They'll kill us all," she whispered into Pavel's ear when he came back to bed. "They'll line us up against a wall and they'll burn the house down."

"It's the Szenberts' son-in-law and his sister and children. There's no one else left," he said.

In the morning, Misha took some food down to the cellar. She opened the door and said "good morning." She saw them all, the stout woman, the teenage boy, and the girl. She did not know them, but she knew the Szenberts' son-in-law, Rachel's husband. He stood with his back to her monotonously hitting his head against the wall.

"What will become of us?" the woman asked.

"I don't know," Misha answered.

They lived in the fourth, darkest cellar until Easter. The woman and her daughter came up stairs only once to take a bath. Misha helped the woman comb out the knots in

her long, black hair. Michal would take food and maps down to them every evening. At night, on the second day of Easter, he led them to the road to Taszov.

A few days later, he was standing at the fence with his neighbor Krasny. They were talking about the Russians and that, apparently, they were close. Michal did not ask about the Krasnys' son who had joined the partisans. One did not talk about that. At the very end, Krasny turned and said:

"There are some dead Jews lying by the road to Taszov."

The Time of Michal

In the summer of 1944, the Russians came by way of Taszov. They were moving down the Highway all day. Everything was covered with dust, their trucks, tanks, cannons, wagons, carbines, uniforms, hair, and faces. They looked as if they had come from under the ground, as though a fairy tale army, sleeping in the land of the lord of the east, had woken up.

The people lined up along the road, happily welcoming the head of the column of troops. The soldiers' faces did not respond. Their gaze moved across the faces of the welcoming crowd indifferently. The soldiers had odd uniforms, coats frayed at the bottom, from under which surprising colors were flashing, red trousers, elegant black vests, and gold trophy watches.

Michal moved the armchair on wheels that Genovefa was sitting in onto the porch.

"Where are the children? Michal, get the children," Genovefa kept repeating indistinctly.

Michal went to the fence and tightly grabbed Antek and Adelka by their arms. His heart was pounding.

He was not seeing this war, but another. Once again, there appeared before his eyes, huge stretches of land that he had once traversed. It had to be a dream, because only in dreams does everything repeat itself like a chorus. He was dreaming the same dream, broad, silent, and terrible, like a column of troops, like explosions muted by pain.

"Grandpa, when will the Polish army come?" Adelka asked and lifted her little red and white flag made of a stick and rags.

He took it from her and threw it into the lilac bush. Then he led the children back into the house. He sat by the kitchen window and looked at Kotuszov and Paper Hill where the Germans still were. He realized that the Volska Road was now the front line. Precisely.

Izydor burst into the kitchen.

"Papa, come quick! Some officers have stopped by and they want to talk. Come on!"

Michal stiffened. He let Izydor walk him down the stairs in front of the house. He saw Misha, Genovefa, the Krasnys, and a group of children from all over Longago. In the middle stood an opened army car, with two men sitting inside. A third one was talking with Pavel. Pavel, as usual, was giving the impression that he understood everything. When he saw his father-in-law, he perked up.

"That's our father. He knows your language. He fought for your army."

"In our army?" the Russian said, surprised.

Michal saw his face and he grew hot. His heart was pounding somewhere in his throat. He knew that he should say something now, but his tongue froze. He was turning it in his mouth like a hot potato. He was trying to form some word with it, even the simplest, but he could not, he had forgotten how.

The young officer watched him with curiosity. The black tails of a tuxedo were sticking out from under his army overcoat. A flash of joy appeared in his slanted eyes.

"*Well, father, what's up with you*? *What's up with you*?" the young officer said in Russian.

Michal had the feeling that all of this, the slanted-eyed officer, this road, these columns of dusty soldiers, that all of it had already happened once, that even this "*what's up with you*?" had happened once before. It seemed to him that time had made a circle like a mill. He was overcome with fear.

"*I am called Michail Juzefovich Nyebyesky*," he said in a shaking voice.

The Time of Izydor

The slanted-eyed officer's name was Ivan Mukta. He was the aide-de-camp to a gloomy lieutenant with blood shot eyes.

"*The lieutenant likes your house. It will be his quarters*," he said happily and began taking the lieutenant's things into the house. While he worked, he made faces, which made the children laugh, but not Izydor.

Izydor was watching him closely, thinking that that he was looking at a real stranger. The Germans, though evil, looked the same as the people from Longago. If it had not been for the uniforms, one would not have been able to tell them apart. It was the

same with the Jews from Jeszkotle. Maybe their skin was a little more tanned and their eyes darker. But Ivan Mukta was different. He was not similar to anyone. His face was round and chubby. It had a strange color as if one was looking into the current of the Black on a sunny day. Ivan's hair sometimes seemed dark blue, and his mouth was the color of mulberries. Of everything, his eyes were the strangest. They were narrow like slits hidden beneath the stretched out eyelids, black and piercing. And probably no one knew what they were saying. It was difficult for Izydor to look into them.

Ivan Mukta set up his lieutenant's quarters in the largest and nicest room on the ground floor, where the clock stood.

Izydor found a way to observe the Russian. He would climb up the lilac bush and peek into the room from there. The gloomy lieutenant would look into the maps stretched out on the table or lean for a long time over his plate.

Ivan Mukta, however, was everywhere. After he served the lieutenant his breakfast and shined his shoes, he would begin helping Misha in the kitchen. He would chop wood, feed the hens, pick currants for compote, play with Adelka, and get water from the well.

"It's very nice of you, mister Ivan, but I can manage on my own," Misha would say at the beginning. But then she apparently began to like it.

Within the first few weeks, Ivan Mukta learned to speak Polish.

Izydor's most important task became not letting Ivan Mukta out of his sight. He would watch him all the time and he feared that the Russian would become deadly if he escaped Izydor's sight. Ivan's wooing Misha also annoyed him. His sister's life was in danger, so Izydor would look for an excuse to be in the kitchen. Sometimes, Ivan Mukta

would try to talk with Izydor, but the boy would get so agitated by it that he would drool and stutter much more than usual.

"He was born that way," Misha would sigh.

Ivan Mukta would sit at the table and drink huge quantities of tea. He would bring sugar either ground or in slightly dirty lumps. He would keep it in his mouth and wash it down with the tea. Then he would tell the most interesting stories. Izydor would act indifferent, but the Russian would say such interesting things that Izydor had to try hard to keep up the appearance that he had something important to do in the kitchen. It was difficult to drink water or put wood in the over for an hour. The infinitely insightful Misha would give her brother a bowl of potatoes and put a knife in his hand. Once, Izydor took a deep breath and suddenly sputtered:

"Russians say that there's no God."

Ivan Mukta set down his glass and looked at Izydor with his impenetrable eyes.

"It's not about whether there is or is not a God. It's not like that. To believe, or not to believe, that is the question."

"I believe there is," Izydor said and courageously raised his chin. "If there is a God, it's in my favor to believe. If there isn't, it doesn't cost me anything to believe either."

"Good thinking," Ivan Mukta complemented him. "But it's not true that faith doesn't cost anything."

Misha stirred the soup angrily with a wooden spoon and cleared her throat.

"And you? What do you think? Is there a God, or isn't there?"

"It's like this." Ivan spread out four of his fingers in front of his face and Izydor thought that he winked at him. He lifted the first finger:

"Either there is and has always been a God, or," here he added the second finger, "there is not and has never been a God, or," the third finger appeared, "God was, but is no longer. And finally," here he prodded Izydor with all four fingers, "there is no God yet and will only appear later."

"Izzy, go get some wood," Misha said in the same tone she used when the men told dirty jokes.

Izydor left and thought about Ivan Mukta the entire time, that he must still have a lot to say.

After a few days, he finally managed to get Ivan completely alone. He was sitting on a bench in front of the house, cleaning his carbine.

"What is it like where you live?" Izydor asked bravely.

"Exactly the same as here. Only there is no forest. There is one river, but really huge and very far away."

Izydor did not develop this subject.

"Are you old or are you young? We cannot tell how old you are."

"I already have my years."

"So maybe you're already seventy?"

Ivan laughed and put down his carbine. He did not answer.

"Ivan, what do you think, is it possible that there might not be a God? Where would all of this have come from?"

Ivan rolled a cigarette. Then he inhaled and made a face.

"Look around. What do you see?"

"I see the road, and behind it, a field, and plum trees, and grass in between them," Izydor looked at the Russian questioningly. "And further on, the forest, and there are probably mushrooms there, only you can't see them from here, and I also see the sky, blue on the bottom, and white and cloudy on top."

"And where is this God?"

"He's invisible. He's under this. He rules and governs all this, makes laws, and adjusts everything to himself."

"Fine, Izydor. I know you are smart, even though you don't look it. I know you have an imagination." Ivan lowered his voice and began speaking slowly. "Now, imagine that there is no God, like you say, beneath everything. Imagine that no one is watching over you, that the whole world is one big mess, or, even worse, it's a machine, a broken down combine, that only works on impulse."

And Izydor looked again as Ivan Mukta told him. He strained his entire mind and opened his eyes wide until tears began flowing from them. Then, for one short moment he saw everything differently. An empty, infinite expanse stretched out everywhere. Everything that was alive in this dead space was helpless and alone. Things happened by accident and when this accident failed to take place, mechanical law appeared. The rhythmic machine of nature. The pistons and cogwheels of history. Regularities that rotted from the inside and crumbled into dust. Cold and sadness reigned everywhere. Every creature held itself close to something, clung to something, to things, to each other, but only suffering and despair resulted from this.

The most important feature of what Izydor saw was temporariness. Beneath its colorful surface everything came together in decay, rot, and destruction.

The Time of Ivan Mukta

Ivan Mukta showed Izydor all the important things.

He began by showing Izydor a world without God.

Then he took him to the forest, and showed him where the partisans who had been executed by the Germans were buried. Izydor had known many of these men. Then he got a fever, and had to lie in his sister's cool bedroom. Misha did not want to let Ivan Mukta in to see him.

"You're entertaining yourself, sir, by showing him all those terrible things. He's just a child after all."

Finally, however, she let Ivan sit next to the sick boy's bed. His rifle lay in his lap.

"Ivan, tell me about death, and about what happens when you die. And tell me, do I have a soul that will never die?" Izydor asked.

"Inside you there is a tiny flame that will never burn out. I have it too."

"Do we all have it? The Germans too?"

"Everyone. And now, go to sleep. When you get better, I'll take you to the other soldiers in the forest."

When Izydor was better, Ivan fulfilled his promise and took Izydor to the Russian company stationed in the forest. He let him look through his binoculars at the Germans in Kotuszov. Izydor found it odd that the Germans looked just like the Russians through

the binoculars. The color of their uniforms was similar, similar trenches, and similar helmets. It made it more difficult for him to understand why they were shooting at Ivan, especially since in their own leather bags they also carried orders from some dreary lieutenant. They also shot at Izydor when he accompanied Ivan. Izydor had to promise that he would not tell anyone about that. If his father ever found out, he would have tanned his hide.

Ivan Mukta showed Izydor other things that he could not tell anyone about. Not because Ivan had told him not to tell, but because remembering them made him feel nervous and ashamed. They were too big to talk about, but not too big to think about.

"Everything is connected. It has always been like this. The need to connect is more powerful than anything. It's enough to look about you."

He squatted in the path they had been walking on, and pointed to two insects joined at the abdomen.

"This is an instinct. That means something one cannot control."

Suddenly, Ivan Mukta pulled down his trousers, and shook his genitals.

"This is an instrument for connecting. It fits into the hole between a woman's legs, because there is order in the world. Every thing fits into every other thing."

Izydor grew as red as a beet. He had no idea what to say. He lowered his eyes and looked at the path. They went to a field behind the Mountain where the Germans' firing could not reach. A goat was grazing next to some abandoned buildings.

"When there are not many women, like now, the instrument fits in your hand, into other soldiers' asses, into a hole in the ground, into different animals. Stay here and

watch," Ivan Mukta said quickly, and handed Izydor his cap and map-case. He ran up to the goat, shifted his rifle onto his back, and dropped his trousers.

Izydor watched as Ivan clung to the goat's rump, and began rhythmically moving his hips. The faster Ivan moved the more Izydor froze in his tracks.

When Ivan returned for his cap and map-case, Izydor was crying.

"What are you crying for? Are you mourning for an animal?"

"I wanna go back home."

"Certainly. Go! Everyone wants to go home."

The boy turned and ran to the forest. Ivan Mukta wiped his sweaty forehead with his hand, put his cap on, and walked away, whistling sadly.

The Time of Ruta

Kloska was afraid of the people in the forest. While hiding, she would watch them as they disturbed the peace of the forest with their strange jabber. They had thick clothes that they never took off, even in the heat. They lugged weapons about with them. They had not yet made it to Blowing Hill, but she could sense that they would come sooner or later. She knew that they were hunting one another in order to kill each other. She wondered where she could go with Ruta to get away from them. They had often spent the night at Florentynka's, but Kloska felt uneasy in the village. At night, she would dream that the sky was a metal cover that no one could carry.

Kloska had not been in Longago for a long time, so she did not know that the Volska Road had become the border between the Russians and the Germans. She did not know that Kurt had shot Florentynka, nor that rifles and the wheels of army cars had

killed her dogs. She dug a shelter under the house so they both had a place to hide when the men in the uniforms came. She became absorbed in digging the shelter and got careless. She let Ruta go alone to the village. She packed her a basket of blackberries and potatoes stolen from the fields. Only when Ruta had gone did Kloska understand that she had made a terrible mistake.

Ruta was walking from Blowing Hill to the village, to Florentynka's along her usual path. Past Paper Hill, and then along the Volska Road that ran along the edge of the forest. She was carrying food for the old woman in her wicker basket. She was supposed to bring back Florentynka's dogs so they could guard against the people. Her mother had told her that if she saw any person, whether they were from Longago or not, she was to get into the forest and run away.

Ruta was only thinking of the dogs when she saw a man peeing on a tree. She stopped, and slowly began backing away. Then someone very strong grabbed her by the arms from behind, and cruelly turned her around. The one who had been peeing ran up to her and hit her in the face so hard that Ruta went limp and fell to the ground. The men put down their guns and raped her. First one, then another, and then came yet a third.

Ruta lay on the Volska Road, the border between the Russians and the Germans. Next to her lay the basket with the blackberries and potatoes. That was how the second patrol found her. Now the men had different colored uniforms. One after another they lay down on her, giving their guns to each other to hold. Then, standing above her, they all smoked cigarettes. They took the basket and the food.

Kloska found Ruta too late. The girl's dress had been pushed up over her face. Her body had cuts all over it. Her stomach and thighs were reddened with blood, and flies were now gathering around it. Ruta was unconscious.

Her mother carried her down into the shelter she had dug under the house. She laid her on a pile of burdock leaves. Their smell reminded her of the day her first child died. She lay next to the girl and listened to her breathing. Then she got up, and with trembling hands mixed some herbs together. The air smelled of angelica.

The Time of Misha

One day in August, the Russians told Michal to lead all the people of Longago into the forest. They said that any day now Longago could find itself on the front lines.

He did as they asked. He went to every cottage and repeated:

"Any day now, Longago will find itself on the front lines."

He also went to Florentynka's home, and only when he saw the empty dog bowls did he remember that Florentynka had already been killed.

"What will become of us?" he asked Ivan Mukta.

"We're at war. This front is for us."

"My wife is sick. She can't walk. We're both going to stay."

Ivan Mukta shrugged his shoulders.

Misha and Missus Parrot were sitting in the horse wagon. They were hugging the children. Misha's eyes were swollen from crying.

"Papa, both of you come with us. I'm begging you. Please."

"We'll watch over the house. Nothing bad will happen. I've survived worse things."

They left Michal a cow, and tied another to the wagon. Izydor led the rest from the barn and took the ropes off their necks. They did not want to go, so Michal picked up a stick from the ground and swatted their rumps. Then Ivan Mukta whistled loudly, and the scared cows trotted off through Stasha Parrot's flowerbeds, and into the fields. They saw them from the horse wagon standing, stupefied by their unexpected freedom. Misha cried the entire way.

The wagon left the Highway into the forest, its wheels fitting into the ruts left by the wagons that had gone that way earlier. Misha walked behind the wagon, leading the children. There were a lot of mushrooms growing along the path. Misha would stop every so often, crouch down, and pick the mushrooms from the ground, pulling up moss and dirt along with them.

"You should leave the stem, a piece of the stem in the ground," Izydor said worryingly. "Otherwise they'll never grow back."

"Let them stop growing," Misha answered.

The nights were warm, so they slept on the ground, on top of quilts they had brought from home. During the day, the men would build dugouts and cut wood. The women, as in the village, would cook and borrow salt and potatoes from each other.

The Boskis lived between some large poplars. Diapers were left to dry in their branches. The Malak sisters shuffled about next to the Boskis. The younger one's husband had joined the Home Army. The older one's husband had joined the Jedrushes. Pavel and Izydor built the two women a dugout.

Without even thinking about it, the people arranged themselves the way they had lived in Longago. They even left an empty space between the Krasnys and the Cherubs. In Longago, that was where Florentynka's house would have stood.

One day, at the beginning of September, Kloska came to the wooded settlement with her daughter. It was obvious that the girl was sick. She could barely move her legs. She was bruised and had a high fever. Pavel Boski, who was acting as a doctor, went to them with his bag, which held iodine, bandages, pills against diarrhea, and sulfide powder. But Kloska would not let him get near her daughter. She asked the women for hot water, and then brewed some herbs in it. Misha gave them a blanket. It looked as though Kloska wanted to stay with them, so the men dug a shelter for them in the ground.

In the evenings, when the forest would grow quiet, they would all sit by the small campfires and listen for any sounds. Sometimes the night would flash, as though a storm were raging somewhere nearby. Then they would hear a terrible rumbling stifled by the forest.

The ones who went into the village were brave. They went to get flour, or the potatoes that had ripened in the gardens. Some went simply because they could not stand living in uncertainty. Old Missus Seraphim went the most often. She no longer cared about her life. Sometimes one of her daughters-in-law would go with her. One of them told Misha:

"You no longer have any home. There's nothing but a pile of rubble."

The Time of the Bad Man

Ever since the people from Longago had escaped into the forest and began living in their dugouts, the Bad Man could not find any space there. The people were squeezed in everywhere, in every thicket and in every clearing. They dug up the peat and hunted for mushrooms and nuts. They would go outside their camps to do their business right onto a wild strawberry bush or the fresh grass. During the warmer evenings, he could hear them having sex in the bushes. He would watch with surprise as they fumbled about trying to build their shelters, and how much time it took them.

He would watch them all day. The longer he looked at them the more he feared and hated them. They were noisy and deceptive. They would move their mouths incessantly, making sounds at each other that did not make any sense. The sounds were neither cries, nor screams, nor murmurs of delight. Their speech meant nothing. They left tracks and smells everywhere. They were arrogant and careless. When those menacing claps of thunder approached, coloring the night sky red, they would fall into a panic and despair. They had no idea where they should run to, or where they could take shelter. He could smell their fear. They stank like the rats that fell into the Bad Man's traps.

The odors that surrounded them irritated the Bad Man. But among them was also a pleasant fragrance, though new. It was a smell of roasted meat and cooked potatoes, of milk, of sheepskin coats, the smell of coffee, of ash and rye. There was also an awful smell, un-animal, purely human. It was a smell of gray soap, disinfectant, lye, paper, weapons, grease, and of sulfur.

Once, the Bad Man stood at the edge of the forest and looked at the village. It was empty and still like a dead animal. Some of the houses had demolished roofs, others had broken windows. There were no birds or dogs in the village. Nothing. Such a sight pleased the Bad Man. Since the people had moved to the forest, the Bad Man would move into the village.

The Time of the Game

In the book *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player*, the description of the Third World begins thus:

> Between the Earth and Heaven exist the Eight Worlds. They hang motionless in space like layers.
>
> God created the Third World a long time ago. He began with the seas and volcanoes, and ended with the plants and animals. But because there is nothing grand in the act of creating, only difficulties and work, God grew tired and became discouraged. The fresh world seemed boring to him. The animals did not understand his harmony. They did not wonder at him. They did not praise God. They ate and multiplied. They did not ask God why he had made the sky blue and the water wet. The hedgehog was not surprised by his spikes, or the lion by his teeth. The birds did not wonder about their wings.

The world lasted like that a long time, and bored God to death. So God came down to the Earth, and provided every animal he encountered with fingers, hands, a face, delicate skin, understanding and the ability to be surprised. He changed the animals into humans. However, the animals did not want to be turned into people at all. For them, people seemed to be horrible, like monsters. So they formed a plan, captured God, and drowned him. And that was how it was left.

In the Third World there is neither God, nor humans.

The Time of Misha

Misha put on two skirts and two sweaters, and wrapped a kerchief around her head. Quietly, so as not to awaken anyone, she snuck out of the dugout. The forest muffled the monotonous cannonade of the distant guns. She took a backpack and was about to leave when she saw Adelka. The child came up to her.

"I'm going with you."

Misha was angry.

"Go back to the dugout. Now. I'll come in soon."

Adelka tightly grabbed onto her skirts and began to cry. Misha hesitated a moment. Then she went back into the dugout for her daughter's coat.

When they stood at the edge of the forest, they thought they would see Longago. But Longago was not there. Against the background of a dark sky, they could not see even the smallest trail of smoke. There were no lights, and there were no dogs barking. Only in the west, somewhere around Kotushov, were there some clouds shimmering like bronze. Misha trembled, and was reminded of a dream she had had that was just like this. "I'm dreaming," she thought. "I'm lying on a pallet in the dugout. I've not gone anywhere. I'm just dreaming." Then she thought that she must have gone to sleep earlier. It seemed to her that she was lying on her new double bed, and that Pavel was sleeping next to her. There was no war. She was having a long nightmare about Germans, and Russians, and the front, and the forest and dugouts. That helped. Misha stopped being afraid, and went onto the Highway. The wet stones in the road ground beneath her shoes. Then Misha thought hopefully that she had gone to sleep even earlier. That the monotonous turning of the coffee mill crank had tired her, and that she had fallen asleep on the bench in front of the mill. She was still young, and now she was dreaming about adult life and war.

"I want to wake up," she said loudly.

Surprised, Adelka looked up at her, and Misha understood that no child could explain the Jews being shot, Florentynka's death, the partisans, what they did to Ruta, the bombardments, the uprooted people, her mother's paralysis.

She looked up. The sky was like the bottom of a jar where God had locked away the people.

They passed by a dark silhouette. Misha supposed it was their barn. She went to the side of the road and stretched her arm out into the darkness. She touched the rough boards of a fence. She heard some faint, strange sounds.

"Someone's playing a harmonica," said Adelka.

As they stood in front of the gate, Misha's heart began beating loudly. Her house was still standing. She could feel that, even though she could not see it. She could feel in front of her its mighty, four cornered form. She felt its mass, and the way it filled up space. She opened the gate and walked to the porch as though she were blindfolded.

The music was coming from inside. The doors from the porch to the front room were nailed up with planks, just as they had left it. So they went to the kitchen entrance. The music became clearer. Someone was playing lively songs on a harmonica. Misha crossed herself, grabbed hold of Adelka tightly, and opened the door.

The music stopped. She saw her kitchen steeped in smoke and darkness. Blankets were hanging over the windows. There were soldiers seated at the table, against the walls, even on the counters. One of them suddenly aimed his rifle at her. Misha slowly raised her hands.

"*This is our place*," he said in Russian, and Misha awkwardly bowed.

Ivan Mukta was among the soldiers. His head was bound in bandages. She found out from him that her parents were living in the mill with the cow. Except for them there was no one left in Longago. Ivan led Misha upstairs and opened the door to the southern room. Before her, Misha saw the winter night sky. The southern room had ceased to exist, but that seemed strangely unimportant to her. Since she had expected that her entire house had been lost, what was one less room.

"Misha, ma'am," said Ivan Mukta, standing on the stairs, "you have to take your parents from here and hide in the forest. Right after your holiday the front will move forward. There'll be a terrible battle. Please don't tell anyone. It's supposed to be top secret."

"Thank you," answered Misha. Only after a moment did the entire danger of his words to sink in. "God, what will become of us? How will we survive a winter in the forest? What's this war for anyway Ivan? Who's leading it? Why do you all walk into a massacre to kill each other?

Ivan Mukta looked at her sadly, but did not answer.

Misha handed out knives to the drunken soldiers so they could peel some potatoes. She brought out some lard that had been hidden in the cellar and cooked some fries. They had never seen fries before. At first they looked at them mistrustfully, but when they began eating them they found them tastier and tastier.

"They don't believe they're potatoes," explained Ivan Mukta.

Another bottle of vodka appeared on the table. Someone began playing the harmonica. Misha laid Adelka down to sleep under the stairs. It seemed to be the safest place.

The presence of a woman excited the soldiers. They began dancing, first on the floor and then on the table. The rest clapped in time with the music. As the vodka flowed into their throats, a sudden madness overcame them. They began stomping, and pounding their rifles onto the floor. Then a young officer with light colored eyes took his pistol from its holster and fired several times into the ceiling. The plaster fell into the glasses. Deafened, Misha covered her head with her hands. It grew quiet, and Misha

could hear herself screaming. The terrified crying of her child accompanied her from under the stairs.

The gloomy lieutenant yelled at the young officer, gesturing to his holster. Ivan Mukta knelt beside Misha.

"Don't be afraid Misha. It's just their way of having fun."

They all left the room for Misha. She checked the door twice to make sure she had locked it.

In the morning, as she was walking to the mill, the officer with the light colored eyes came up to her, saying something that sounded like an apology. He showed her a ring on his finger and some papers. As usual, Ivan Mukta appeared from somewhere.

"He has a wife and child in Moscow. He says he's very sorry for last night. All this has made him very anxious.'

Misha did not know what to do. On an impulse she went up to the man and hugged him. His uniform smelled of earth.

"Please try not to get killed Ivan," she said to Mukta.

He shook his head and smiled. His eyes looked like two dark lines.

"People like me don't die."

Misha smiled.

"Well, goodbye then," she said.

The Time of Michal

They had been living in the kitchen with the cow. Michal had made her a bed behind the door where the water pale stood. During the day he would go out to the barn

for straw, then feed the caw and shovel out the manure. Genovefa would watch him from the chair. Twice a day he would take the pale, sit on the stool, and milk the animal, just the way he knew how. There was never much milk, just enough for two people. Michal would collect cream from the milk so he could take it to the children in the forest sometime.

The day would be short, like it was sick and did not have enough strength to unwind itself to the end. It grew dark early, so they would both sit at the table where an oil lamp would flicker. They covered the windows with a horsecloth. Michal would light a fire in the oven and open the small door. The fire raised their spirits. Genovefa would ask that he turn her towards the fire.

"I can't move. I've died while living. I'm such a burden on you. A burden you didn't count on," she would sometimes say in a grave voice that came from somewhere deep inside her belly.

Michal would calm her.

"I like occupying myself with you."

At night he would seat her on the chamber pot, clean her, and then move her to the bed. He would straighten her arms and legs. It seemed to him that she was looking at him from the depths of her body, as though she had been locked up there. At night she would whisper: "Hold me."

They would listen together to the guns, most often coming from somewhere by Kotuszov, but sometimes everything would shake, and they knew that the shell had hit Longago. At night strange sounds would reach them: a chomping, humming, and then

the quick steps of a person or animal. Michal was afraid, but he did not want to show it. Whenever his heart would begin beating too loudly he would turn over on his side.

Then Misha and Adelka came for them. Michal no longer insisted that they stay. The mill of the world had stopped. Its mechanism had broken down. They took the Highway to the forest, wading in the snow.

"Let me look at Longago one last time," Genovefa asked, but Michal pretended not to hear her.

The Time of the Drowned Man Plushch

The Drowned Man Plushch woke up. He emerged from the water and looked at the surface of the world. He saw that the world was heaving in waves. The air was flowing in great bursts, surging, and shooting towards the sky. The water was churning, and fire and heat were striking into it. What had been above was now below, and what was below, was now pushing up.

This interested the Drowned Man Plushch, and he wanted to act. He tested his strength, and pulled a cloud of fog and smoke from above the river. A gray cloud glided after him along the Volska Road towards the village. At the fence to the Boskis' home he saw a haggard dog. He bent down towards it. The dog yelped fearfully, tucked his tail beneath its legs and ran. This upset the Drowned Man Plushch, so he sent the cloud of fog and smoke over the orchard. He wanted to put it into the smoking chimneys like usual, but the chimneys were no longer warm. The Drowned Man Plushch went around the Seraphims' house and realized that there was no one there. There was no one anywhere in Longago. The sound of the wind moving the barn doors swelled in the air.

The Drowned Man Plushch longed to frolic about in people's things so that the world would react to his presence. He wanted to steer the wind, to hold it in its misty body, to play with the shape of the water, to trick and scare people, to frighten off animals. But the violent motion of the air stopped and everything became empty and quiet.

He stopped for a moment and felt that faint, weak warmth that people give off coming from the forest. He was delighted, and whirled about. He returned along the Volska Road and scared the same dog. From the sky, he pulled some low clouds, which gave him strength. The sun was still not up.

Something stopped him at the forest. He did not know what it was. He hesitated, and then turned towards the river, not to the priest's fields, but farther, to Paper Hill.

The thin pine forest had been crushed, and there was smoke coming from it. There were large holes gaping in the ground. The end of the world must have come that way yesterday. Hundreds of rotting human bodies were lying in the tall grass. There was so much blood evaporating red into the gray sky that it turned crimson in the east.

The Drowned Man Plushch saw a movement in the deadness. The sun broke through from the shackles of the horizon, and began to set the spirits of the dead soldiers free.

The spirits emerged from the bodies insane and confused. They shook like shadows, like transparent balloons. The Drowned Man Plushch became almost as happy as a living person. He went into the thin forest and tried to whirl the spirits about, to dance with them, to scare them and pull them after him. There were many of them, hundreds, maybe thousands. They stood, swaying uncertainly above the earth. The

Drowned Man Plushch pushed in between them, chuckling, brushing against them, twirling about, wanting to play like a puppy. For a moment, they swayed between the colors of the morning air, and then, like released balloons, they soared into the sky and disappeared.

The Drowned Man Plushch could not comprehend that they were leaving, that there was a place to go when a person died. He tried to chase after them, but they were already subject to a different law than the law of the Drowned Man Plushch. Blind and deaf to his entreaties, they were moved by instinct like tadpoles that only know one direction to travel.

The forest grew white with them, and was then suddenly empty, and the Drowned Man Plushch was alone once again. He was angry. He spun about and slammed into a tree. A startled bird squawked fearfully, and blindly flew off towards the river.

The Time of Michal

The Russians took their dead from Paper Hill, and drove them into the village on horse wagons. They dug a large hole in the Cherubs' field and buried the soldiers' bodies there. They placed the officers to the side.

Everyone who returned to Longago went to look at the makeshift grave, with no priest, with no words, and with no flowers. Michal also went. He carelessly let the gaze of the gloomy lieutenant fall on him. The lieutenant patted Michal on the back, and ordered that the bodies of the officers be taken next to the Boski's home.

"No, don't dig there," Michal pleaded. "Isn't there enough room for a grave for your soldiers? Why in my daughter's garden? Why would you pull up her onions and flowers? Go to the cemetery, I'll show you another place."

The gloomy lieutenant, who had always been polite and kind, pushed Michal away, and one of the soldiers aimed his rifle at him. Michal stepped back.

"Where's Ivan," Izydor asked the lieutenant.

"*The grave.*"

"No!" Izydor cried. For a moment, the Lieutenant held him with his gaze.

"*Why no?*"

Izydor turned and ran away.

The Russians buried the eight officers in the garden, under the bedroom window. They covered the grave, and when they left it snowed.

From that time no one would sleep in the bedroom by the garden. Misha folded up the blankets and took them upstairs.

In the spring, Michal cut out a cross from a tree and placed it under the window. Then, with a stick, he delicately tilled the dirt and planted snapdragons. The flowers bloomed lush and colorful, with their faces opened towards the sky.

At the end of the summer of 1945, when the war had finally ended, an army jeep pulled up to the house. A Polish officer and some man in civilian clothes got out. They said that they would exhume the officers. Then a truck full of soldiers appeared with a hay cart, on which they placed the bodies they had just pulled from the Earth. The Earth and the snapdragons had been sucking the blood and water from them. The wool uniforms had survived, and were all that had kept the decaying corpses from falling apart.

The soldiers who moved the bodies onto the cart had tied kerchiefs around their mouths and noses.

The people from Longago stood on the Highway, and tried to see as much as they could over the fence. But when the cart started its way to Jeszkotle, they drew back in silence. The chickens were the bravest. They ran after the cart that was bouncing along the stones, greedily gulping down whatever fell off it.

Michal vomited in the lilac bushes. He never again put a chicken egg to his mouth.

The Time of Genovefa

Genovefa's body stiffened from inactivity like a clay pot in a kiln. It sat in an armchair on wheels. It was now dependent on others' charity. It was put into bed, washed, sat down, and carried to the porch.

Genovefa's body was one thing, and Genovefa another. She sat, locked inside it, trapped, deafened. She could only move her face and the very tip of her fingers, but she had already forgotten both how to smile and weep. The words, awkward and rough, fell from her mouth like stones. Those kinds of words had no power. Sometimes she would try to scold Adelka when she would hit Antek, but the granddaughter did not pay much attention to her threats. Antek would hide under his grandmother's skirt. Genovefa could do nothing to hide him. She could not even hug him. She would watch helplessly as the bigger and stronger Adelka would pull her brother's hair. She would become filled with a rage that quickly died out since there was no way for it to find an outlet.

Misha would speak at great length to her mother. She would move her armchair to the door, to the warm kitchen stove, prattling on all the while. Genovefa would listen inattentively. Everything her daughter said bored her. She became less and less interested in who remained, who had been lost. She no longer cared about mass, or Misha's friends from Jeszkotle, or the new ways of preserving peas, the news on the radio that Misha always commented on, her absurd doubts and questions. Genovefa preferred to concentrate on what Misha did and what was happening in the house. So she watched her daughter's belly grow a third time, the tiny snow of flour that would fall from the molding board to the floor when Misha would knead dough for noodles, a fly drowning in the milk, a poker left on the stove, red with heat, and hens in the front hall trying to peck out shoelaces. That was a concrete, tangible life that flowed out of her day after day. Genovefa could see that Misha would not be able to manage the big house they had given her. So she disentangled a few clear sentences from herself, and persuaded her daughter to take on a girl to help. Misha hired Ruta.

Ruta had grown into a beautiful girl. Genovefa's heart sank when she saw her. She had been waiting anxiously for the moment when both of them, Misha and Ruta, would stand next to each other, and she could compare them to each other. And could anyone doubt that they were so similar? They were two of a kind. One was smaller and darker, the other taller and fuller. One's hair and eyes were chestnut, the other's were honey colored. Aside from that, they were similar. At least it seemed so to Genovefa.

She watched as Ruta would clean the floors, as she would chop the large heads of cabbage, as she would grate cheese into a bowl. The longer she watched her the more certain she was. Sometimes, when the laundry was being done, or the house was being

cleaned, and Michal was busy, Misha would have the children take their grandmother to the forest. The children would carefully carry her out in the armchair. Then, unseen behind the lilacs, they would speed along the Highway, pushing the armchair before them, with Genovefa's stiff, majestic body sitting in it. They would leave her with her hair undone and her arm left hanging helplessly over the arm of the chair, and run off into the woods, looking for mushrooms and wild strawberries.

On one such day, Genovefa saw Kloska out the corner of her eye coming onto the Highway from the forest. Genovefa could not move her head, so she waited. Kloska came closer to her and walked around the armchair with curiosity. She crouched in front of Genovefa and looked into her face. They eyed each other for a moment. Kloska no longer resembled the girl who had been walking barefoot in the snow. She had grown stout and even bigger. Her thick braids were now white.

"You exchanged your child with mine," Genovefa said.

Kloska laughed, and took Genovefa's paralyzed hand into her own warm hand.

"You took the girl, and left me the boy. Ruta is my daughter."

"All young women are the daughters of older women. In any case, you don't need either daughters or sons now."

"I'm paralyzed. I can't move."

Kloska lifted Genovefa's paralyzed hand and kissed it.

"Stand up and walk," she said.

"No," Genovefa whispered, unconsciously shaking head.

Kloska laughed, and walked on towards Longago.

After that meeting, Genovefa no longer felt like speaking. She would only say "yes" or "no." She heard Pavel whisper to Misha that paralysis attacks the mind as well. "Let them think it," she thought. "The paralysis attacked my mind, but I'm still somewhere."

After breakfast, Michal would wheel Genovefa outside. He would set the armchair on the grass next to the fence and then sit on the bench. He would pull out a cigarette paper, and slowly break up some tobacco between his fingers. Genovefa would look in front of her at the Highway, watching the smooth cobblestones that looked like thousands of people's heads buried in the ground.

"Are you cold?" Michal asked.

She shook her head.

Then Michal would finish smoking and leave. Genovefa would stay in her armchair, looking at Stasha Parrot's garden, at the sandy path through the field that weaved between the patches of green and gold. Then she would look at her feet, her knees, her hips. They were distant, and did not seem to belong to her any more than the sand, the fields or the gardens. Her body was a broken figurine of fragile human material.

It surprised her that she could still move her fingers, that there was feeling left in the tips of her pale hands that had not done any work for months. She would place her hands onto her frozen knees and play with the pleats in her skirt. "I am a body," she said to herself. Within Genovefa's body, an image of people being killed began to grow, like a cancer or mold. Killing depends on taking away the right to movement. After all, life

is movement. The killed body does not move. A person is body. Everything a person experiences begins and ends in the body.

One day, Genovefa told Michal:

"I'm cold."

He brought her a wool shawl and a pair of mittens. She moved her fingers, though she could no longer feel them, so she could not tell whether they were moving or not. When she looked up at the highway, she saw the dead returning. They were going along the Highway from Czernica to Jeszkotle, looking like a large procession, like a pilgrimage to Czestochova. However, pilgrims are always accompanied by a din of voices, by monotonous songs, by tearful litanies and the sound of shoes shuffling along the cobblestones. Here there was only silence.

There were thousands of them. The marched in crooked, wavering rows. They walked quickly in an eerie silence. They were gray, as though they had been bled.

Genovefa looked among them for Eli and the Szenberts' daughter with a baby in her arms, but the dead glided past too quickly for her to watch. Then she saw the Seraphims' son, but only because he had walked close by. He had a giant brown hole in his forehead.

"Franek," she whispered.

Without slowing down, he turned his head and looked at her. He reached his hand out to her. He moved his lips, but Genovefa did not hear anything.

She watched them the entire day, until evening, the march never diminishing. They continued gliding past even after she had closed her eyes. She knew that God was also watching them. She saw his face. It was dark and terrible, and full of scars.

The Time of the Baron Popielski

In 1946, the Baron Popielski still lived in the palace, though everyone knew it would not be for much longer. His wife had taken the children to Cracow, and now she was travelling back and forth, getting ready for the move.

It seemed that what happened around the Baron did not matter to him. He played. He would sit in his library for days and nights on end. He slept on the couch. He neither changed his clothes nor shaved. When his wife would leave to visit the children he would not eat. Sometimes for three or four days. He did not open the windows. He did not speak. He did not go out for walks. He did not even go downstairs. Once or twice, some officials from the district would visit to discuss nationalization. They had briefcases full of orders with stamps. They would pound at the door and pull at the bell. He would look down at them and rub his hands together.

"Everything is agreed," he would say in a voice hoarse and dried out from speaking. "I'll go to the next field."

Sometimes the Baron Popielski would need his books.

The game demanded different information from him, but he had no trouble with this since he could find everything in his own library. Because dreams played a crucial role in the game, the Baron Popielski had to learn how to dream on command. What was more, he slowly gained control over his dreams. He would do what he wanted in them, which was completely different from his real life. He would intentionally dream about a given subject, and immediately after, intentionally wake himself up on the other side, as

though he had walked through a hole in a fence. He needed a moment to come around, and then it would begin to work.

The game gave him everything he needed, and even more. What did he need to leave his library for?

Meanwhile, the clerks from the district were taking his forests, his timber, his farmland, lakes, and pastures. They would send him letters that informed him as a citizen of the young socialist nation that the brickyard, the sawmill, the distillery, and the mill no longer belonged to him. Finally, even the palace was not his. They were polite, and even set the date for the possessions to be turned over. At first, his wife cried, then she prayed, and finally she began packing their things. She looked like a candle. She was thin and pale like wax. Her hair suddenly turned gray, and would shine in the cold, pale light of the dim palace.

The Baroness Popielska did not resent her husband for going mad. She worried that she alone would have to decide what could be taken and what they would have to leave. When the first car arrived, the Baron Popielski, pale and unshaven, came downstairs with two suitcases in his hands. He did not want to show what he had in them.

The Baroness ran up to the library and quickly examined it. She saw that there was nothing missing. There were no empty spaces on the shelves, no paintings or knick-knacks had been moved, nothing. She called the workers, and they threw the books into boxes however they fell. Then, so that it would go faster, they pulled down entire shelves at a time. The books spread out their unflying wings, listlessly falling into a pile. When

they ran out of boxes, the workers stopped. They picked up the full boxes and left. It happened that they only took everything from A to L.

Meanwhile, the Baron Popielski had been contentedly standing by the car, breathing in the fresh air, which stunned him after being locked in his library for so many months. He wanted to laugh, to rejoice, to dance. The oxygen burned through in his thick, sluggish blood, and swelled his dried arteries.

"Everything is exactly the way it should be," he said to his wife in the car as they drove along the Highway to the Kielce Road. "Everything that happens, happens well."

Then he said something else that made the chauffeur, the workers and the Baroness look at one another:

"The eight of clubs has been executed."

The Time of the Game

In the book *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player*, which is the instructions for playing the Game, in the description of the Fourth World, the following story can be found:

> God created the Fourth World in a passion that gave him some relief in his divine suffering.
>
> When he created humanity, it had such an effect on him that he regained consciousness. So he stopped any further creation. After all, could there be anything more perfect? And now, in his divine time, he admired his own work. The deeper God looked into people, the more he loved humanity.

But humans turned out to be ungrateful. They busied themselves with farming and breeding children, instead of paying attention to God. Then, in God's mind a sadness appeared, which oozed into darkness.

God had fallen in love, and it was unrequited.

Divine love, like any other, is burdensome. Humanity had matured, and so decided to free itself of its obsessive lover. "Let me go," it said. "Let me experience the world in my own way. Just get me ready for the journey."

"You won't make it without me," God told humanity. "Don't go."

"Oh, knock it off," said humanity. So God sadly bent down the branch of the apple tree for humanity.

God was left alone, and he missed humanity. He was so hurt by the thought that he had been abandoned, that he dreamt it was he who had driven humanity out of paradise.

"Come back to me. The world is awful and it could kill you. Just look at the earthquakes, at the volcanoes, at the fires and floods," he thundered from the clouds.

"Oh, come on. I'll manage," humanity answered back, and left.

"One must live," said Pavel. "One must raise children, make a living, keep learning, keep climbing."

That was what he did.

He went back to selling wood with Aba Kozienicki, who had survived a concentration camp. They bought a forest for timber, and organized it to be processed and exported. Pavel bought a motorcycle, and would drive around the area looking for orders. He got himself a pigskin briefcase where he kept a receipt book and some indelible pencils.

Since his business was going well, and a continuous stream of money was flowing in this pocket, Pavel decided to continue his education. Training to become a doctor was already unrealistic, but he could still become qualified as a hygienist or a paramedic. In the evenings, Pavel would study the secret of the reproduction of flies, and the complex chains of the lives of tapeworms. He studied the contents of vitamins in nutritional products, the spreading of diseases like tuberculosis and abdominal typhus. After a few years of course work and training, he became convinced that medicine and hygiene, freed of obscurantism and superstition, would be able to transform peoples' lives, and that the Polish village would change into an oasis of sterilized pots and yards disinfected with Lysol. That was why Pavel, as the first in the area, devoted one room in his home as being both a bathroom and a first aid room. It was impeccably clean there. It had an enamel tub, scrubbed faucets, a metal trashcan with a lid, glass dishes for cotton, and padlocked glass shelves where he kept all the medicines and medical tools. When he finished his next course he became a qualified nurse, and then he began giving people

shots in his room, never forgetting to give a short lecture at the same time on the topic of everyday hygiene.

Then his business with Aba fell apart due to the nationalization of the forests. Aba was leaving. He visited to say farewell. They hugged each other like brothers. Pavel Boski realized that a new stage in his life was beginning, that from then on he would have to manage on his own, and, what was more, he would have to do it under completely new conditions. He would not be able to raise a family from giving shots.

So he packed all his course certificates into his leather briefcase, and drove to Taszov on his motorcycle to look for work. He found a job as a health inspector. From that moment, specifically from the moment he joined the Party, he began to advance slowly but steadily.

His work demanded that he drive around to all the area villages on his noisy motorcycle to investigate the cleanliness in stores, restaurants and bars. Whenever he would appear with his leather briefcase full of documents and test tubes for feces, it was treated like the arrival of a horseman of the Apocalypse. Pavel could have ordered the closing of any store and any restaurant whenever he had wanted. He was important. He was given presents. He was treated to vodka, and the freshest ham hocks in the gelatin.

This was how he met Ukleja, who was the owner of the candy store in Taszov, and a few lesser official businesses. Ukleja introduced Pavel to the world of secretaries and lawyers, of drinking and hunting parties, of willing, buxom waitresses, and of alcohol, which gave one the courage to take out of life what one wanted with full hands.

In this way, Ukleja occupied the space that had been left by Aba Kozienicki, a space set aside in the life of every man for a guide and friend. Without him, a man would

only be a lonely, misunderstood warrior in a world of chaos and gloom that crawled out from everywhere whenever people were not looking.

The Time of the Mycelium

The mycelium grows all over the forest, and maybe all over Longago. Beneath the Earth, beneath the soft undergrowth, beneath the grass and stones, it creates a maze of thin balls of tendrils and strings that entangle everything. The threads of the mycelium have the power to squeeze into every lump of the Earth and bind the tree roots and hold giant boulders back in their slow, never ending movement forward. A mycelium is similar to mold. It is white, delicate, and cold. It is a moon like, subterranean lace, a moist hemstitch of thallus, the slippery umbilical cord of the world. It grows over meadows and wanders about the roads of humans. It climbs up the walls of people's homes, and sometimes, in a surge of power, it imperceptibly attacks their bodies.

A mycelium is neither a plant nor an animal. It is unable to draw strength from the sun because its nature is alien to the sun. It is not pulled to warmth or life because its nature is neither warm nor living. A mycelium lives by sucking out the juices of what dies, of what decays and seeps into the Earth. A Mycelium is the life of death, the life of decay, the life of that which has died.

All year long, a mycelium gives birth to its cold, damp children, but those who arrive in the world in the summer and autumn are the most beautiful. Alongside the roads of humans, fairy ring mushrooms grow on top of thin little legs. In the grass, puffballs and stout skinned mushrooms whiten near perfection. And boletuses and shelf

fungus take possession of dead trees. The forest is full of golden chanterelles and russulas and suede-like boletes.

The mycelium does not divide up or distinguish between its children. It bestows upon all of them the strength to grow and the power to disseminate its spores. It gives one fragrance, another the ability to hide right under people's noses, and still others have shapes that leave one breathless.

Deep beneath the Earth, in the very center of Wodenica, a giant, entangled ball of thalluses pulsates. This is the heart of the mycelium. From here the mycelium spreads out over the world. Here the forest is dark and humid. The exuberant blackberry bushes wrap around the tree trunks. Everything is overgrown with lush moss. People instinctively avoid Wodenica, even though they are unaware that here, beneath the Earth, the heart of the mycelium beats.

Of all the people, only Ruta knows about this. She guessed it after looking at the most beautiful toadstools she had ever seen, which grow there every year. Toadstools are the guards of the mycelium. Ruta would lay down on the ground among them and look up at their foamy, snow-white slips.

Once, Ruta heard the life of the mycelium. It was an underground rustle that sounded like a hollow sigh. Then she heard the delicate cracking of lumps of earth as a thread of thallus pushed them. Ruta heard a beat of the mycelium's heart, which happens only once in eighty human years.

From that moment she would always go to that humid place in Wodenica, and lie down on the wet moss. When she would lie for a long time, she would feel the mycelium in yet another way, because the mycelium would slow down time. Ruta would fall into a

dream-not-a-dream and see everything in a completely different way. She would see single gusts of wind, the slow, graceful flight of insects, the smooth movement of ants, molecules of light that would settle onto the surface of the leaves. All the high pitched sounds, such as the trill of the birds, and the squeals of animals would change into a drone and rumble. They would glide close to the Earth like fog. It would seem to Ruta that she had been lying there for hours, even though only a short moment had passed. That was how the mycelium would take possession of time.

The Time of Izydor

Ruta was waiting for him under the linden tree. The wind was blowing, and the tree was creaking and wailing.

"It's going to rain," she said in place of a greeting.

They were walking in silence along the Highway. Then they turned into their forest outside of Wodenica. Izydor was walking half a step behind, stealing glances at the girl's naked shoulders. Her skin seemed thin, almost transparent. He felt like touching and stroking her.

"Do you remember how, a long time ago, I showed you the border?"

He nodded his head.

"We were going to explore it. Sometimes I don't even believe in that border. It let the strangers in."

"From the point of view of science, such a border is impossible."

Ruta laughed, and grabbed Izydor by the hand. She pulled him in between the small pines.

"I'll show you something else."

"What? How many more things do you have to show? Show me all of them at the same time."

"You can't do that."

"Is it alive or dead?"

"Neither."

"Is it some kind of animal?"

"No."

"A plant?"

"No."

Izydor stopped, and nervously asked:

"A person?"

Ruta did not answer. She let go of his hand.

"I'm not going," he said, crouching down.

"Whatever. I'm not going to force you."

She knelt next to him, watching some large forest ants marching in a line.

"Sometimes you're so smart, and sometimes so stupid."

"But more often stupid," he said sadly.

"I wanted to show you something strange in the forest. Mama says that this is the center of Longago. And you don't want to go."

"Okay, let's go."

They could not hear the wind in the forest. The air became stuffy. Izydor could see tiny drops of sweat on the back of Ruta's neck.

"Let's take a break," he said. "Let's lie down here and rest."

"It's going to rain soon. Come on."

Izydor lay down on the grass, putting his arms under his head.

"I don't want to watch the centers of the world. I want to lie here with you. Come here."

Ruta hesitated. She walked away a few steps, then came back. Izydor squinted, and Ruta changed into a blurry shape. The shape came closer and sat on the grass. Izydor stretched out his arm and it landed on Ruta's leg. He could feel the tiny hairs under his fingers.

"I would like to be your husband, Ruta. I would like to make love to you."

She drew back her leg. Izydor opened his eyes and looked straight into Ruta's face. She seemed cold and distant. She was not like he had known her.

"I will never do that with someone I love. Only with someone I hate," she said, getting up. "I'm going. Come with me if you want."

He quickly stood up and followed after her, as usual half a step behind.

"You've changed," he said quietly.

She turned around angrily and stopped.

"Of course I've changed. Are you surprised? The world is evil. You saw it yourself. What kind of God was it that created such a world? Either he is himself evil, or he allows evil. Or he got it all mixed up."

"You can't talk like that."

"I can," she said, and ran ahead.

It got very quiet. Izydor could hear neither the wind, nor the birds, nor even the buzz of insects. It was empty and silent, as if he had fallen into a pile of feathers, or into the very middle of a huge down quilt, or a snowdrift.

"Ruta!" he screamed.

She flashed between the trees, and then disappeared. He rushed off in the direction he had seen her. He looked about helplessly because he understood that without her he would not be able to get back home.

"Ruta!" he screamed even louder.

"I'm here," she said and walked from behind a tree.

"I want to see the center of Longago."

She pulled him into a thicket of raspberries and wild blueberries. The plants grabbed Izydor by his sweater. Ahead of them, there was a small clearing surrounded by some enormous oaks. The ground was covered with older and newer acorns. Some of them were crumbling into dust. Others were sprouting. And still others were shining with a fresh greenness. In the very middle of the clearing stood a tall stone of white sandstone. On this obelisk laid yet another broader, more massive stone. It resembled a hat. Beneath the stone hat, Izydor saw the outline of a face. He drew closer to see it, and then saw that the same face was on both sides of the stone. That meant there were three faces. Suddenly, Izydor experienced a deep feeling of incompleteness, a lack of something extremely important. He had the impression that he already knew all of this from somewhere, that he had seen the clearing and the stone in the middle of the clearing, and its three faces. He looked for Ruta's hand, but it did not make him feel any better. Ruta's hand pulled him, and they started walking around the clearing, over the acorns.

Then Izydor saw the fourth face, the same as the others. He walked faster and faster, then let go of Ruta's hand as he began running, staring at the stone. He kept seeing one face turned toward him, and two in profile. And then he understood where this feeling of lack came from, a sadness lying beneath everything, a sadness present in everything, in every incident, since forever. One cannot comprehend everything at once.

"You can't see the fourth face," Ruta said, as if she was reading his thoughts. "That is the center of Longago."

It began raining. When they got to the Highway they were completely soaked. Ruta's dress was sticking to her body.

"Come to our place. You can dry out there," he offered.

Ruta stood in front of Izydor. The entire village was behind her.

"Izzy, I'm marrying Ukleja."

"No," said Izydor.

"I want to leave, and go to the city. I want to travel. I want to have earrings and high-heeled shoes."

"No," Izydor repeated, and started shivering. The water flowed down his face, and blurred his view of Longago.

"Yes," Ruta said, and took a few steps back.

His legs grew weak. He was afraid he would fall.

"I'll be in Taszov. That's not far," she yelled, and went back into the forest.

The Time of Kloska

The Bad Man would come to Blowing Hill in the evenings. He would appear from the forest at dusk. It would seem as though he peeled himself from the forest wall. He was dark, his faced covered with the trees' shadows that never disappeared. Spider webs would gleam in his hair, and earwigs and beetles would wander about in his beard. That disgusted Kloska. He also smelled different, not like a person, but like a tree, like moss, like the fur of a wild animal. When she would let him enter her, she knew she was not having sex with a person. He was not human, despite the human figure and the three human words that he knew how to say. When he would come to her, she would be overtaken by fear, but also by the excitement that she herself was changing into a doe, or a sow, or a cow, that she was nothing more than female, like the billions of other females in the world, and that she had within herself a male like the billions of other males in the world. Then the Bad Man would let out a long, piercing howl that must have been heard throughout the forest.

He would leave her at dawn. When he left, he would always steal a little food. Kloska tried several times to follow him through the forest to find his hideout. If she could have seen it, she would have had a kind of power over him, because both animals and people reveal the weak sides of their nature in the places they hide.

She was never able to track the Bad Man farther than past the great linden trees. Whenever she turned her head for just a moment from the bent back flashing between the trees, the Bad Man would disappear, as though he had sunk beneath the ground.

Finally, Kloska understood that her human, womanly smell had been betraying her. That was why the Bad Man always knew that he was being followed. So she

gathered up some mushrooms, tree bark, pine needles, and leaves, and placed it all into a stone pot. She then poured rainwater over it, and waited a few days. The next time the Bad Man came to her and then left into the forest the next morning with a chunk of pork fat between his teeth, she quickly undressed and smeared her mixture over herself and ran after him.

She saw him at the edge of the meadow, sitting on the grass, eating his pork fat. He wiped his hands on the ground and went into the tall grass. He looked about apprehensively in the open space, and then sniffed the air. He suddenly dropped to the ground. Only after a moment did Kloska hear the clatter of horse wagons on the Volska Road.

The Bad Man went to Paper Hill. Kloska plunged into the grass, bent down to the ground, and followed after his tracks. When she found herself at the edge of the forest she could not see him anywhere. She tried sniffing the air like he had done, but she could not smell anything. She was walking around a tall oak helplessly, when suddenly a twig fell near her, and then a second, and then a third. Kloska realized her mistake. She looked up. The Bad Man was sitting on a branch in the oak, bearing his teeth. She was frightened by her night lover. He no longer even looked like a person. He growled at her warningly, and Kloska understood that she had to leave.

She went straight to the river, where she washed off the smell of the Earth and forest.

The Time of Ruta

Ukleja drove his Warsaw as far as he could. Then, he had to get out and walk the last several meters on foot. He swore as he stumbled over a rut in the forest path. At last, he stood in front of Kloska's dilapidated shack and spit angrily.

"Alright, woman! Let me in! I've got business with you!" he called.

Kloska walked out, and looked straight into Ukleja's reddened eyes.

"I won't give her to you."

He felt uncertain for a moment, but quickly collected himself.

"She's already mine," he said calmly. "She only insisted that you gave your blessings. I'm supposed to ask you for her hand."

"I won't give her to you."

Ukleja turned toward the car and yelled:

"Ruta!"

After a second, the car door opened, and Ruta got out. Her hair was now short and in curls, and was slipping out from under a small hat. In her narrow skirt and high heels she seemed very slim and very tall. She walked with difficulty in her new shoes along the sandy path. Kloska looked at her possessively.

Ruta stopped next to Ukleja and uncertainly put her arm around his. Her gesture emboldened Ukleja.

"Bless your daughter, woman. We don't have a lot of time."

He lightly pushed Ruta ahead.

"Get in the house Ruta," Kloska said.

"No, Mama. I want to marry him."

"He'll hurt you. I'll lose you to him. He's a werewolf."

Ukleja laughed.

"Ruta, let's go. This is senseless."

The girl turned toward him quickly, and threw her bag at his feet.

"I'm not going. Not until she let's me," she yelled angrily.

She walked to her mother. Kloska held her close to herself. They stood like that until Ukleja grew impatient.

"Let's go Ruta. You don't have to satisfy her. If she's not happy, she's not happy. Such a magnificent lady!"

Then, Kloska spoke to him over her daughter's head.

"You can take her, but on one condition."

"Yeah?" answered Ukleja with interest. He liked to haggle.

"From October to the end of April she'll be yours. From May to September, mine."

Ukleja looked at her surprised, as though he did not understand. He started counting the months on his fingers, and realized that the division was not equal, and that he had more. He would have more months than Kloska. He smiled cunningly.

"Alright. It's agreed."

Ruta took her mother's hand and put it to her cheek.

"Thank you Mama. I'll be all right. I have everything there that I could want."

Kloska kissed her on the forehead. She did not even look at Ukleja when they left. Before the car moved, it let out a cloud of smoke, and for the first time in their lives, the trees on Blowing Hill tasted gas fumes.

On his name day, Pavel always spent time with his family and with the secretaries and lawyers he worked with. But on his birthday he would only invite Ukleja. For Pavel, birthdays were for friends, and Pavel only had one friend.

When the children heard the dull hum of the Warsaw, they ran in a panic into their hiding place beneath the stairs. Ukleja, unaware that he incited terror in them, brought the children a large thermos of ice cream and a cardboard box full of cones.

In her blue maternity dress, Misha called them to the table in the living room, but they were slow in taking their seats. Izydor caught Ruta by the arm in the door.

"I have some new stamps," he said.

"Izydor. Don't bother the guests," Misha scolded him.

"You look beautiful in your fur coat. Like Snow White," Izydor whispered to Ruta.

Misha began serving the food. There were ham hocks in gelatin, and two kinds of salad. There were dishes of smoked meat and devilled eggs. There was bigos warming on the stove, and chicken thighs frying. Pavel poured some glasses of vodka. The men sat opposite each other and discussed the price of leather in Taszov and Kielce. Then Ukleja told a dirty joke. The vodka flowed down their throats, and the glasses began to seem too small to satisfy the body's horrible thirst. The men still seemed sober, even though their faces had reddened and their collars were unbuttoned. Finally, their eyes grew cloudy, as though they had frozen from the inside. Ruta went with Misha into the kitchen.

"I'll help you," she said, and Misha gave her a knife. Ruta's large hands sliced the cake, her red fingernails flashing over the white cream like drops of blood.

The men began singing, and Misha looked at Ruta anxiously.

"I have to put the children to bed. Will you take them the cake?" she asked her.

"I'll wait for you. I'll start the dishes."

"Ruta!" Ukleja suddenly yelled from the living room. "Come here, bitch!"

"Come on," Misha said to her quickly, and picked up a tray with some cake.

Ruta laid down the knife and reluctantly followed Misha. They sat next to their husbands.

"Look at the bra I bought my wife!" Ukleja yelled. He tugged at her blouse, revealing her freckled cleavage and the snow-white lace of her brassiere. "French!"

"Stop," Ruta said quietly.

"Stop what? I'm not allowed? You're mine, all of you, and what you're wearing." Ukleja saw that Pavel was amused and repeated:

"She's all mine! And everything she has on! I have her all winter. In the summer she can fuck off to her mother's."

Pavel offered him a full glass. They did not pay any attention when the women went to the kitchen again. Ruta sat at the table and smoked a cigarette. Then Izydor, waiting for her, took advantage of the moment to bring his box of stamps and postcards.

"Look," he said.

Ruta picked up the postcards and looked at each for a moment. She exhaled a trail of white smoke from her red lips, the lipstick leaving mysterious traces behind on the cigarette.

"I can give them to you," Izydor said.

"No. I'd rather look at them with you, Izzy."

"In the summer we'll have more time, won't we?"

Izydor could see that, behind her eyelashes, stiff with mascara, Ruta was holding back a giant tear. Misha poured her a glass of vodka.

"I'm not very lucky Misha," Ruta said. The tear that had been trapped behind her eyelash rolled down her cheek.

The Time of Adelka

Adelka did not like her father's colleagues, all those men whose clothes reeked of cigarettes and dust. Ukleja was the most important of them. That was probably why he was so big and fat. But even Ukleja stayed quiet and polite, and spoke quieter when Mr. Widyna came to see her father.

Mr. Widyna had a chauffeur who would wait the entire evening in the car in front of the house. Mr. Widyna had a green hunter's jacket and a feather in his hat. In greeting, he would pat Pavel on the back, and disgustingly kiss Misha's hand. Misha would tell Adelka to take care of little Vitek, and get the best food from out the pantry. The knife would flash in her hand when she cut the dried kielbasa and ham. Pavel would speak of Mr. Widyna with pride.

"These days, it's good to have connections like him."

These connections of her father's had acquired a taste for hunting, and would come out of the big forest decorated with hares a pheasants. They would lay everything

on the table in the hallway, and before they had even sat, they would toss back a glass of vodka. The house would smell of bigos.

Adelka knew that she would have to play on such an evening. She would make sure that Antek was there with his accordion. Nothing scared her as much as when her father was angry.

When the time would come, her mother would tell them to get their instruments and go to the living room. The men would be smoking cigarettes and it would grow quiet. Adelka would give the tone and she and Antek would start playing. At *The Mountains of Manchuria*, Pavel would take his violin and join the duet. Misha would stand in the doorway, watching them with pride.

"I'm going to buy the youngest a double bass," Pavel would say.

Vitek would hide behind his mother when they would look at him.

While they played, Adelka would think about the dead animals on the table in the hall.

All their eyes were open. The birds' eyes looked like the glass stones in rings, but the hares' eyes were terrible. It seemed to Adelka that they followed her every move. The birds lay tied in bunches at the legs like radishes. The hares were lying separately. She would look for the bullet wounds in their fur and feathers. But she only sometimes managed to find the round, clotted scabs. Blood would drip from the dead hares' noses onto the floor. Their mouths looked like cats' mouths. Adelka would straighten their heads so they were lying on the table.

Once, among the dead pheasants, she noticed some other bird. It was smaller and had beautiful blue feathers. That color astonished her. Adelka wanted to have those

feathers. She did not yet know what she would do with them, but she wanted to have them. She carefully tore out the feathers, one after another, until she had a blue feathery bouquet in her hands. She tied it with a white hair ribbon, and went to show it to her mother. She walked straight into her father in the kitchen.

"What is this? What did you do? Do you know what you've done?"

Adelka stepped back.

"You've plucked Mr. Widyna's jay! He shot it especially!"

Misha stood next to Pavel. The guests' curious faces appeared in the door.

Her father angrily grabbed Adelka by her arm and led her to the living room. He furiously pushed her so that she was standing in front of Mr. Widyna, who was talking with someone.

"What?" he asked wearily. His eyes were cloudy.

"She plucked your jay!" Pavel yelled.

Adelka held out the bouquet of feathers to him. Her hands were shaking.

"Give those feathers back to Mr. Widyna," Pavel barked at her. "Misha, bring the peas. We'll punish her properly. With children, you have to be firm. And keep them on a short leash."

Misha reluctantly handed him a bag of peas. Pavel spilled some peas in a corner of the room, and told his daughter to kneel on them. Adelka knelt, and it grew quiet for a moment. She felt everyone looking at her. She thought that she should die.

"Fuck the jay! Pour the vodka, Pavel!" Widyna sputtered in the middle of the silence, and the din of voices started again.

The Time of Pavel

Pavel was lying on his back, and he knew that he would not be able to fall asleep. It had begun to get gray out the window. He had a headache, and he was terribly thirsty. But he was too tired and depressed to get up and go to the kitchen. So he brooded over yesterday evening, the big drink up, the first few toasts, because he could not remember the rest, Ukleja's coarse jokes, some dancing, the women's unhappy faces, and the animosity. Then he thought about being forty, and that the first part of his life had ended. He had reached his peak, and now, lying on his back with a terrible hangover, he looked into the passing time. He started remembering other days and other evenings. He watched them like a film being played from the end to the beginning, grotesque, ridiculous, and nonsensical, like his life. He could see the particulars of all the images, but they seemed unimportant and meaningless. He saw his whole past this way. He did not find within it anything that he could be proud of, anything that would evoke any good feelings. There was nothing certain, constant, nor anything to hold onto within this bizarre story. There was only struggle, unfulfilled dreams, and unsatisfied desires. "Nothing's gone right for me," he thought. He wanted to cry, so he tried to, but he must have forgotten how, because he had not cried since his childhood. He swallowed the thick, bitter phlegm, and tried to force a childish sob out of his throat and lungs. Nothing came out of it. So he threw himself with his thoughts into the future, and forced himself to think about what would be, and what he still had to do: a course, probably a promotion, his children in high school, adding onto the house, renting out rooms, maybe even a pension, a small summer house for vacationers from Kielce and Cracow. For a moment he perked up inside, and he forgot about the headache, about his bone-dry tongue, and

about the tears he was holding back. But the terrible sadness came back. He thought that his future would be like his past. Various things would happen in it that would not mean anything, things that would not lead anywhere. That thought evoked fear in him, because behind all this, behind the course and the promotion, behind the pension and adding onto the house, behind all the ideas, behind all action, there was death. And Pavel Boski realized that in this sleepless, hung over night, he was helplessly looking at the birth of his death. That the hour of the noon of his life had just struck, and now the dusk was slowly, insidiously, and silently approaching.

He felt like an abandoned child, like a lump of earth thrown along the road. He was lying on his back in a rough, indefinable present, and he felt that with every second he and this present were falling apart into nothingness.

The Time of Ruta

Ruta was even ready to love Ukleja. She could treat him like a huge, sick animal. But Ukleja did not want her love. He wanted control over her.

Sometimes it seemed to Ruta that a hairy Bad Man was living inside Ukleja. He would lie on top of her the same way the Bad Man would lie on her mother. Her mother would consent to it with a smile on her face, but for Ruta it evoked within her an anger and hate that grew and swelled like yeast dough. Ukleja would always fall asleep on top of her, and his body would secrete an odor of alcohol. Ruta would slip from under his body and go to the bathroom. She would run a bathtub full of water and lie in it until the water got cold.

Ukleja would lock Ruta inside the house alone. He would leave plenty of good food from the "Seclusion" restaurant for her in the kitchen, like chicken, pork knuckle, fish in gelatin, vegetable salad, eggs in mayonnaise, herring in cream. Everything that was on the menu. She had everything she could need in Ukleja's house. She would walk from room to room, listening to the radio, and try on her dresses and shoes and hats. She had two wardrobes of clothes, a box full of gold jewelry, several hats, and dozens of pairs of shoes. So she got all she had wanted. In the beginning, she thought she would be able to stroll along the streets of Taszov in these clothes, and parade in front of the church in the market, and hear the gasps of amazement, and see the looks full of wonder out the corner of her eye. But Ukleja would not let her go out alone. She could only go with him. And he would take her to his friends and lift up her silk skirts to show off her thighs. Or he would take her to the Boskis' in Longago, or to play bridge with the lawyers and secretaries, where she would get bored and stare at her nylon stockings for hours.

Then Ukleja seized the camera, tripod, and darkroom equipment of a photographer who had owed him money. Ruta quickly realized what photography was about. The camera stood in the bedroom, and Ukleja would always set the timer before he came to bed. Then, in the red light of the darkroom, Ruta would see the heaps of Ukleja's huge body, his ass, genitals, and his breasts, fat and prominent like a woman's and covered with black stubble. She would also see herself crushed beneath him, fragmented into breasts, thighs and belly. So when she was left alone, she would put her dresses on, and stand all perfumed and elegant in front of the camera lens.

"Click," the camera would say with amazement.

The Time of Misha

The passing of time worried Misha, especially in May. May abruptly squeezed into its place in the row of months, and exploded. Everything began to grow and blossom all of a sudden.

Misha, being used to the light gray, early spring view from the kitchen window, could never get used to the daily changes May was lavished with. First, in the span of two days, the meadows would turn green. Then the Black would sparkle with green, and let into its waters the light that, from that day on, would take on different shades. The forest on Paper Hill would turn turquoise, then green, and finally it would turn dark and submerge into shadow.

In May, Misha's orchard would blossom, and it was a sign that she could wash all the clothes that were moldy from winter, all the curtains, the bed sheets, rugs, the tablecloths and bedspreads. She would string the laundry lines up in between the blossoming apple trees, and she would fill her pink and white orchard with bright colors. The children, chickens and dogs would all toddle after her. Sometimes, Izydor would also come, but he would always talk about things that did not interest her.

In the orchard, she would think about how one cannot stop the blossoming of trees and that the petals would inevitably fall, and the leaves would turn brown with time, and then also fall. She was not comforted by the thought that next year it would all be the same, because she knew that it was not true. Next year the trees would be different, bigger, their branches more massive, the grass would be different, the fruit different. No

blossoming branch would ever be repeated. "This laundry hanging will never be repeated," she thought. "I will never be repeated."

She would go back to the kitchen and get down to preparing dinner, but everything she did seemed boorish and clumsy. The pierogies were malformed, the potato dumplings uneven, the noodles thick and crude. The cleanly peeled potatoes suddenly had brown spots that had to be scooped out with the tip of a knife.

Misha was like that orchard and like everything in the world that is subject to time. She gained weight after the third child. Her hair lost its shine and became straight. Her eyes now had the color of dark chocolate.

She was pregnant for the fourth time, and for the first time she thought that it was too much for her. She did not want that child.

A son was born whom she named Marek. He was quiet and calm.

From the beginning, he would sleep the whole night. He would perk up only when he saw her breast. Pavel went for more training, so Michal took care of Misha during her labor.

"Four children are a lot for you," he said. "You should protect yourselves somehow. After all, Pavel knows something about it."

Soon, Misha became certain that Pavel was chasing women with Ukleja. Maybe she should not hold it against him. First she was pregnant, fat and swollen. Then in labor, which she did not bear well. Still, she held it against him.

She knew that he groped and fucked all those waitresses, butcher shop clerks from the places he inspected. She would find spots of lipstick and long hairs on Pavel's shirts.

She started looking for alien smells on his things. Finally she found an open packet of condoms that he had never used when they were making love.

Misha called Izydor from upstairs, and together they divided the huge double bed in their bedroom. She could see that Izydor liked that idea. He even added something from himself to this new set up. He put a flowerpot with a large palm in the middle of the room, between the two beds. Michal watched this from the kitchen, smoking a cigarette.

When Pavel returned home tipsy, Misha came up to him with the four children.

"I'll kill you if you do it again," she said.

He blinked his eyes, but he did not try to pretend that he did not know what she meant. Then he threw his shoes in the corner and laughed happily.

"I'll kill you," Misha repeated, so seriously that the baby in her arms cried sadly.

In late autumn, Marek came down with whooping cough, and died.

The Time of the Orchard

An orchard has its own two times which interweave with one another, and continue year after year. They are the time of the apple tree and the time of the pear tree.

In March, when the Earth becomes warmer, the orchard begins to vibrate and sink into the body of the Earth with underground, claw-like paws. The trees nurse at the Earth like pups, their trunks growing warmer.

In the year of the apple tree, the trees pull out of the underground rivers of the Earth a sour water that has the power of change and movement. In this water there is a need to push, to grow, and to spread out.

In the year of the pear tree it is completely different. The time of the pear tree is one of sucking out sweet juices from minerals, of slowly and mildly connecting them in the leaves with the rays of the sun. The trees stop growing, and taste the sweetness of their very being. Without movement, without growth. Then, the orchard seems permanent.

In the year of the apple tree the flowers bloom briefly, though most beautifully. The frost often cuts them down or the air violently shakes them off. There is a lot of fruit, though slight, and not at all grand. Seeds wander far from the place of their birth, dandelion puffballs cross over a stream, grasses fly over the forest into different meadows, and sometimes the wind even caries them over the sea. The newborns of animals are weak and small, but those who survive the first days grow into healthy and cunning individuals. Foxes born in the time of the apple tree do not hesitate too come up to chicken coops, just like hawks and weasels. Cats kill mice not because they are hungry, but for the killing itself. Aphids attack human orchards, and butterflies choose the brightest colors for their wings. The years of the apple tree give birth to new ideas. People blaze new paths. They cut the forest down and plant new trees. They build dams on the rivers and buy land. They dig foundations for new houses. They think about travel. The men cheat on women, and the women on men. Children suddenly become grown up, and go on their own way. People cannot sleep. They drink too much. They make important decisions and begin to do what until then they had not done. New ideas come to life. Governments change. The markets are unstable and from one day to the next one can either become a millionaire or lose everything. Revolutions that change

political systems break out. People dream, and mistake their dreams with what they believe to be reality.

In the year of the pear tree, nothing new happens. What has already happened continues. What has not happened yet, gathers its strength in non-existence. Plants strengthen their roots and stems instead of shooting up. Flowers bloom slowly and lazily until they become huge. There are only a few roses on rose bushes, but each one is as big as a human fist. The fruit grow like this in the time of the pear tree as well. They are sweet and aromatic. The seeds fall right where they were growing, and instantly let out firm roots. The stocks of grain are thick and heavy. If not for people, the weight of the grains would pull them to the ground. Animals and people become fat, because the silos are bursting from the harvest. Mothers give birth to big children, and twins are born more often then usual. Animals also have numerous litters, and have so much milk in them, that they can feed all the young. People think about building houses, or even entire cities. They draw up plans, measure the land, but do not get down to the work. Banks show enormous profits, and the warehouses of huge factories are filled with merchandise. Governments become stronger. People dream and finally notice that all their dreams are coming true, even when it is already too late.

The Time of Pavel

Pavel had to take a few days off from work when his father died. His father had been dying for three days. It kept looking like the end, and an hour later Old Boski would get up, and walk to the Highway. He would stand at the fence and nod his head. Pavel and Stasha would take him by the arm and lead him back to bed. He did not say

anything for the entire three days. It seemed to Pavel that his father was looking at him pleadingly, as though he wanted something. But Pavel believed he had done everything he could. He stayed by him the entire time, giving him water to drink and changing his sheets. He had no idea how else he could help his dying father.

Finally, old Boski died. Pavel dozed off in the morning, and when he awoke after an hour, he saw that his father was not breathing. The old man's tiny body had sunken in and gone limp like an empty bag. There was no doubt that there was already no one in him.

The sight seemed all the more awful to Pavel since he did not believe in an immortal soul. He was overcome with the fear that soon he too would change into a similar dead scrap of body, and that would be all that was left after he was gone. Tears began flowing from his eyes.

Stasha acted very calmly. She showed Pavel the coffin that his father had made for himself. It was leaning against the wall in the barn. Its lid was made of shingles.

Now, Pavel had to take care of the funeral arrangements, and, whether he wanted to or not, he had to go to the parish priest.

He met him in the rectory's courtyard by his car. The priest invited Pavel into his cool, dark office, where he sat behind his glossy, polished desk. He looked for the proper pages in the death registry for a long while, then neatly wrote in Old Boski's information. Pavel was standing in the doorway, and since he did not enjoy feeling like a penitent, he went to the chair by the desk on his own, and sat down.

"How much will this cost?" he asked.

The priest put down his pen and looked at him seriously.

"I've not seen you in church for years."

"I'm a nonbeliever, sir."

"Your father was rarely at mass as well."

"He always went to Christmas mass."

The priest sighed and stood up. He began pacing up and down the office, snapping his fingers.

"My God," he said, "for Christmas mass. That's too little for a decent Catholic. 'Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.' That's what's written, isn't it."

"I'm don't concern myself with that, sir."

"If the people who had died the past ten years had been to every Sunday mass, and had given a zloty, you know how much that would be?"

The priest counted for a moment in his head, and then said:

"The funeral will cost two thousand."

Pavel could feel his blood pounding in his head. He saw red spots everywhere.

"And I say fuck all of it" Pavel said, and jumped up out of the chair.

He was at the door in a single moment, and grabbed the doorknob.

"Fine, fine, Mr. Boski," he heard from the desk. "Make it two hundred."

The Time of the Dead

When Old Boski died, he found himself in the Time of the Dead. Somehow, that time was affixed to the cemetery in Jeszkotle. On the cemetery wall there was a tablet with a clumsily written inscription that read:

God sees

Time escapes

Death chases

Eternity waits.

When Boski died, he immediately understood that he had made a mistake, the he had died badly, carelessly, that he had gotten confused while dying, and that he would have to go through everything again. He also understood that his death was a dream, just like his life.

The Time of the Dead imprisoned within itself those who had naively thought that it was unnecessary to learn death, those who had flunked death like an exam. The more the world moved forward, the more it praised life, the stronger it tied people to life, then the more crowded the Time of the Dead became, and the noisier the cemeteries grew. Only here did the dead slowly regain consciousness after life, and realize that they had lost the time that had been given to them. After death they discovered the secret of life, and it was a vain discovery.

The Time of Ruta

Ruta was cooking bigos for the holidays, and threw in a handful of cardamom. She threw the cardamom in because its grains were beautiful. They had a perfect shape, a black sheen, and a nice aroma. Even their name was beautiful. It sounded like the name of a distant land, the Kingdom of Cardamom.

The cardamom lost its black sheen in the bigos, but its aroma permeated the cabbage.

Ruta was waiting for her husband with the Christmas Eve dinner. She lay down in bed and polished her fingernails. Then, from under the bed, she pulled some German newspapers that Ukleja had brought home. She looked them over curiously. She liked the pictures of distant countries the most. They showed views of exotic beaches, beautifully tanned men, and shapely, smooth women. Ruta understood one word in the entire newspaper, "Brasil." That country was Brasil. A mighty river flowed through Brasil. It was a hundred times bigger than the Black and the White put together. There was a giant forest, a thousand times larger than the Great Forest. In Brasil, the cities flowed with riches, and the people looked happy and content. Suddenly, Ruta started to miss her mother, even though it was the middle of winter.

Ukleja came home late. When he stood in the doorway in a fur coat covered with snow, Ruta could instantly see that he was drunk. He did not like the smell of the cardamom, or the taste of the bigos.

"Why don't you ever make borscht with ravioli? It's Christmas Eve after all!" he yelled. "You only know how to fuck! It doesn't matter who, Russians, Germans, or that halfwit Izydor. That's all you have on your mind, you whore!"

He walked up to her on wobbly legs, and hit her in the face. She fell. He kneeled next to her, and tried to enter her, but his pasty manhood would not listen to him.

"I hate you," she muttered between her teeth, and spit into his face.

"Good. Hate is as strong as love."

She managed to wriggle out from under his drunken bulk. She locked herself up in a room. A second later, the pot with the bigos struck against the door. The blood that

was flowing from her split lip did not bother Ruta. She started trying on dresses in front of the mirror.

The aroma of the cardamom oozed under the door into her room the entire night. The fur coats and lipsticks smelled of it. It was the smell of long journeys and exotic Brazil. Ruta could not sleep. Once she had tried on all the dresses, and matched all her shoes and hats to them, she pulled two suitcases from under the bed, and put her most valuable things in them. She packed her two expensive fur coats, her silver fox wrap, her box of jewelry, and the newspaper with Brazil. She dressed warmly, and quietly tiptoed with the suitcases through the dining room where Ukleja was snoring sprawled out on the couch.

She left Taszov, and made it to the Kielce highway. For several kilometers, she waded heavily through the snow, dragging the suitcases, until, finally, she recognized in the darkness the place where she needed to enter the forest. The wind came up, and it started to snow.

Ruta came up to the border of Longago, turned around, faced north, and found in herself the feeling that allows one to cross all borders, latches, and gates. For a moment, she caressed that feeling within herself. The blizzard broke loose, and Ruta entered it from the beginning to the end.

The Time of the Game

When the Player finally finds the exit to the Fifth World, but cannot decide what to do next, and so looks for help in the instructions, which is the *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player*, the Player finds the following story:

> In the Fifth World, God speaks to himself when his loneliness is exceptionally overwhelming.
>
> He would look with fondness upon the people, especially the one named Job. "If I were to take away that everything his happiness rested on, if I took away all his possessions, layer after layer, would he still be who he is now? Would he not curse me and blaspheme? Would he still respect and love me despite all this?"
>
> God looked down on Job, and told himself: "He most certainly would not. He only holds me in such high esteem because I give him gifts. I will take from Job what I have given him."
>
> And God peeled Job like an onion. And cried for him out of sympathy. First he deprived him of everything that Job had, his home, his land, his flocks of goats, the people that worked for him, groves, and forests. Then he took from him those that he loved, his children, his women, and his family and friends. Finally he

deprived Job of that which made him who he was, his healthy body, healthy mind, his habits and devotions.

Then he looked at his work, and had to squint his divine eyes. Job was shining with the same light with which God shone. Job's luster might have even been brighter, since God had to squint his divine eyes. Frightened, God hurriedly gave Job back everything, and even gave him other new things. He established money for their exchange, and with the money, he created safes and banks, and gave beautiful objects, fashions, desires, and lusts. And incessant fear. He bestowed Job with all this, until his light slowly began to dim, and finally disappeared.

The Time of Lila and Maya

The girls were born the year that Michal died in the Taszov hospital, and Adelka began going to high school. She did not like that they had been born. She could no longer sit and read her books as much as she wanted. Her mother would call for her from the kitchen in a shaking voice and ask for help.

Those were miserable years, with the threadbare pre-war jackets that they wore now instead of overcoats, and the poor pantry that, for years, had only had a pot of lard and a few jars of honey.

Adelka remembered the night when her mother gave birth to the twins, and how she cried. Adelka's grandfather, already sick, sat next to her bed.

"I'm almost forty years old. How can I bring up two girls?"

"Just like the other children," he said.

But the entire burden of raising that doubled problem fell onto Adelka. Her mother had many other things to worry about, like cooking, doing the laundry, and keeping the farmyard in order. Her father only appeared at night. They would speak to each other angrily, as though they could not stand the sight of one another, as though they had suddenly come to hate each other. He would immediately go into the cellar where he would illegally tan hides, thanks to which they could live. As soon as she got home from school, Adelka would have to take the stroller, and take the girls for a walk. Then, with her mother, she would have to feed them, change them, and, in the evening, help her mother with bathing them. Only after she had saw to putting them to bed could she finally sit down to her lessons. That was why, when they came down with scarlet fever, she thought it would be better for everyone if they just died.

They lay in their double bed unconscious from the fever. They were identical in their double suffering. The doctor came, and had them wrapped up in wet sheets to bring the fever down. Then he packed up his bag and left. At the gate, he told Pavel that, on the black market, he could buy antibiotics. That word sounded magical, like the living water from fairy tales. So Pavel got on his motorcycle. In Taszov, he found out that Stalin had died.

He had to fight his way through the melting snow to Ukleja's house, but there was no one home. So he went to the market square, to the committee office looking for Widyna. The receptionist's eyes were swollen from crying and she told him that the secretary was not receiving anyone. She would not let him in. So Pavel left and looked

around the city helplessly. "Whoever's already died, and whoever's still dying, Taszov is full of death," he thought. He had the idea to just go for a drink of vodka, soon, now. His legs carried him on their own to the restaurant "Seclusion." He immediately went to the counter, behind which Basha was preening herself, with her bee's waist and huge breasts. Pieces of lace were pinned in her thick hair.

Pavel wanted to go around the counter to cuddle up to her fragrant cleavage. She poured him some vodka.

"Did you hear what happened?" she asked.

He tossed back the vodka in one gulp, and Basha gave him a plate of herring in cream.

"I need antibiotics. Penicillin. You know what that is?"

"Who's sick?"

"My daughters."

Basha came out from behind the counter and threw an overcoat on. She led him down some streets, to the river, to some small houses that the Jews had left behind. Her strong legs in nylon stockings jumped over the soggy piles of horse manure. She stopped in front of one of the houses and told him to wait. She returned after a minute and told him the price. It was staggering. Pavel gave her a wad of bills. After a moment he had a small cardboard box in his hands. Of the words on the top he only understood *made in the United States.*

"When will you come by my place?" she asked when he got onto his motorcycle.

"Not now," he said, and kissed her.

That evening, the girls' fever subsided, and the next day, they had gotten better. Misha's prayers to Our Lady of Jeszkotle, the Queen of Antibiotics, had been answered by this sudden recovery. In the evening, when she had checked that their foreheads were cool, she slid under the covers next to Pavel and held him with her entire body.

The Time of the Linden Trees

Along the Highway, which goes from Jeszkotle to the Kielce highway, grow linden trees. They looked the same at the beginning as they will look at the end. The have fat trunks, and roots that reach deep inside the Earth, where they meet with the foundations of everything that lives. In the winter, their mighty limbs cast pointed shadows onto the snow, and mark the hours of a shorter day. In the spring, the linden trees release millions of green leaves that lead the sun to the Earth. In the summer, their fragrant flowers attract swarms of insects. In the autumn, the linden trees make the whole of Longago red and bronze.

The lindens, like all plants, live in an eternal dream, whose beginning lies in the seeds of the trees. The dream does not grow, it does not expand along with them, and it is always the same. The trees are imprisoned in space, but not in time. Sometimes they are released from their dream, which is eternal. Emotions do not grow in their dream, as in the dreams of animals, nor are pictures born, as in the dreams of people.

The trees live through matter, through the flow of juices from the depths of the Earth, and from the leaves turning toward the sun. The spirit of the trees rests after its many real journeys. The tree experiences the world only because of matter. For a tree, a

storm is a warm-cold, lightly intense stream. When it arrives, the entire world becomes a storm. For a tree, there is no world before a storm or after.

In the four changes of the seasons of the year, a tree does not know that time exists, or that the seasons follow one after another. For a tree, all four qualities exist at the same time. Part of the summer is winter, and part of the spring is autumn. Cold is part of the heat, and death is part of birth. Fire is part of water, and Earth is part of the air.

Trees seem to be eternal to people. Since forever, they always walked through the shadows of the lindens on the Highway, neither frozen nor moving. For the trees, people exist eternally, which means as much as if they had never existed.

The crash of axes and the thunder of lightning break into the eternal dream of the trees. What people call death is only a momentary disturbance of their dream. What people call the death of trees resembles the restless existence of animals, because the clearer and more astute their consciousness becomes, the greater their fear. But the trees never reach the turmoil of the kingdom of animals and people.

When a tree is dying, a different tree takes over its dream without meaning or sensation. That is why trees never die. In their ignorance of their existence they are liberated from time and death.

The Time of Izydor

When Ruta left Longago, and it had become clear that she would never return, Izydor decided to enter a monastery.

There were two orders in Jeszkotle, one female and one male. The nuns looked after the old people's home. He would often see them as they were transporting groceries from the store by bicycle. They took care of the forgotten graves in the cemetery. Their contrasting black and white habits reflected off the washed out grayness of the rest of the world.

The monastery carried the name "The Reformers of God." Before Izydor set off for the monastery, he took a long time to observe the sad, austere building, hidden behind the damaged stone wall. He noticed that the same two monks were always working in the garden. They would quietly till around their vegetables and white flowers. There were only white flowers, such as lilies, daffodils, anemones, white peonies, and dahlias. One of the monks, probably the most important, would go to the post office and do the shopping. The rest must have always been locked up in the secret interior. They had devoted themselves to God. That especially appealed to Izydor, to be cut off from the world, immersed up to the neck in God. To know God, to examine the order of the works he had created, and to finally answer the questions of why Ruta had left, why his mother had gotten ill and died, why his father had died, why people and animals were killed in war, and why God allowed evil and suffering.

If Izydor were admitted to the monastery, Pavel would no longer call him a freeloader, or mock and jeer at him. Izydor would not have to see all those places that reminded him of Ruta.

He told Misha of his intentions. She laughed.

"Go ahead and try," she said, wiping one of the children's bottoms.

The next day, he went to Jeszkotle and rang the antique bell to the doors of the monastery. Nothing happened for a long time. It was probably a test of his patience. Finally, however, he heard the latch creak, and an old man in a dark gray habit opened the door for him. He had never seen the man before.

Izydor told him why he had come. The monk did not show any surprise or even smile. He nodded his head and told Izydor to wait outside. The latch creaked again. After several minutes the doors once again opened, and Izydor was allowed inside. The monk led him through some corridors, up and down some stairs, and into an empty, spacious hall with a desk and two chairs. After another several minutes, another monk came into the room. Izydor recognized him as the one who went to the post office.

"I'd like to enter the monastery," Izydor announced.

"Why?" the monk asked simply.

Izydor cleared his throat.

"The woman I wanted to marry left. My parents are dead. I feel alone and I long for God, though I do not understand him. I know that things could come together better among you, if I knew God better. I would like to get to know him through books, through other languages, through different theories. The district library is poorly looked after." Izydor had to hold back his grievances with the library. "But, I hope the brother does not think that I would only read and read. I would like to do something useful, and I know that this order, The Reformers of God, is exactly what I need. I would like to change things for the better, to reform all evil."

The monk stood and stopped Izydor in mid sentence.

"You're saying reform the world. That's very interesting, but unrealistic. It is impossible to either better or worsen the world. It must stay as it is."

"Yes, but, after all, you call yourselves reformers."

"Oh, you misunderstand, my dear boy. We have no intentions to reform the world in anyone's name. We are reforming God."

It was quiet for a moment.

Startled, Izydor finally asked, "How can you reform God?"

"It can be done. People change. Times change. Automobiles, sputniks. God can sometimes seem, how would one say, anachronistic, and too big, too powerful, and so also a bit unable to fit into people's imaginations.

"I thought that God was immutable."

"All of us make mistakes in something fundamental. That's a purely human characteristic. Saint Milo, the founder of our order, proved that if God were immutable, if he did not move, the world would cease to exist."

"I don't believe that," Izydor said resolutely.

The monk stood, so Izydor did as well.

"Come back when you feel the need."

"I didn't like it," Izydor said to Misha when he came into the kitchen.

He lay in his bed, which stood in the exact middle of his attic beneath the window vent. The small rectangle of the sky was a picture, a holy painting that could have hung in a church.

When Izydor would look at the sky and the four corners of the world, he would always have the desire to pray, but the older he grew the more difficult it became for him

to remember the words of any familiar prayers. Instead, there appeared in his mind thoughts that would punch holes in the prayers and rip them to shreds. So he would try to concentrate and imagine the figure of the immutable God in the starry picture. His imagination always created an image that was unacceptable for his mind. Once he was an old man sitting back on his throne, with a look so stern and cold that Izydor immediately blinked his eyes and drove him from the window frame. Another time, God was a misty spirit that was so volatile and undefined that he could not stand it. Sometimes, a real person would pretend to be God, most often Pavel, and then Izydor would lose interest in praying. He would sit on his bed, swinging his legs. Then he discovered that what truly bothered him about God, was his divine sex.

Then, without any feeling of guilt, he saw him in the window as a woman, as Goddess, or however she would be called. It helped him feel some relief. He prayed to her with an ease that he had never felt before. He spoke to her like he spoke to his mother. That lasted for a time, but finally, an indefinable anxiety came to accompany his prayer, an anxiety that spoke within his body in hot waves.

God was a woman, mighty, big, damp and steamy, like the Earth in spring. Goddess existed in a space similar to a storm cloud full of water. Her power was overwhelming, and it reminded Izydor of an experience from childhood that he feared. Every time he came back to her, she would answer him with such attention that he choked. He could not say anything else. The prayer lost any form and intention. One cannot want anything from Goddess, one can only absorb her, breathe her in, melt into her.

One day, as Izydor was gazing into his little piece of the sky, he experienced a revelation. He understood that God was neither a man nor a woman. He realized it when he said "Oh, God." The entire problem of God's sex was unraveled within this word. In Polish, "Oh, God" sounded like "sun," like "air," like "space," like "field," like "sea," like "grain," like "dark," "light," "cold," "warm." Izydor excitedly repeated the new, true divine name, and every time he knew more and more. So God was young, and at the same time it had existed since the beginning of the world, or even earlier (because "Oh, God" sounds like "always"), it was essential for all life (like "food"), it was found in everything ("everywhere"), but if one tried to find it, it was not in anything ("nowhere"). God was full of love and joy, but it could also be cruel and dangerous. It had within itself every possible characteristic, every virtue that is present in the world, and it took on the form of every thing, every occurrence, and every time. It created and destroyed, or allowed a creation to destroy itself. It was unpredictable like a child, like an insane person. In a certain way, it was similar to Ivan Mukta. God existed in such an obvious way that Izydor wondered how he could not have realized it.

This discovery gave him a lot of relief. When he thought about it, somewhere inside him, a laugh broke out. Izydor's soul was giggling. He also stopped going to church, which met with Pavel's favor.

"But, I don't think that they'll take you into the party," he said one day at breakfast, in order to dash his brother-in-law's eventual hope.

"Pavel, you don't need to tell him that," Misha informed Pavel.

Because Izydor cared as little for the party as he did for going to church. Now, he needed time to think, to remember Ruta, to read, to study German, to write letters, to

collect more stamps, to gaze into his window and slowly, lazily get a sense of the order of the universe.

The Time of Missus Parrot

Old Boski had built a house, but he had not dug a well, so Stasha Parrot would have to go as a neighbor to her brother's home for water. She would fasten water buckets to a yoke and carry them over her shoulders. The buckets would creak rhythmically as she walked.

Missus Parrot would take water from the well, furtively looking about the farmyard. She saw the bed linens airing out, the limp bodies of the plump quilts flung over the laundry poles. "I wouldn't even want such quilts," she thought. "Their too warm and the feathers get all bunched up. I prefer my thin, light blankets." Some of the cold water fell out of the buckets onto her bare feet. "I also wouldn't like such big windows. How much washing that has to be. Or those lace curtains. You can't see anything through them. I'd never want so many children, and high heeled shoes are bad for your legs."

Misha must have heard the creak of the yoke. She came out to the steps and invited Stasha inside. Stasha left the buckets on the concrete, and went into the Boskis' kitchen, where it always smelled of burnt milk and lunch. She sat on the small table by the stove, never on one of the chairs. Misha shooed away the children, and went under the stairs.

She always brought something useful from under there, like slacks for Janek, a sweater, Antek's old shoes. Missus Parrot always had to alter things from Misha since

they were too small. But she loved sewing in bed when she would wake up. She would add a wedge, a panel, or some frill, or she would unstitch a dart.

Misha treated Stasha to a cup of coffee.

The coffee was well brewed. It had a thick skin on top where the sugar would lie for a moment before it sank to the bottom. Stasha could not look at Misha's shapely fingers as they poured the beans into the coffee mill and then turned the crank. The drawer of the coffee mill finally filled up, and a smell of freshly ground coffee spread about the kitchen. He liked that smell, but she did not like the bitter taste of the coffee. So she would poure a few spoonfuls of sugar into the glass, until the sweetness prevailed over the bitterness. She quietly watched as Misha tasted the coffee, as she stirred it with her spoon, as she took the glass in two fingers and lifted it to her mouth. And then she did the same.

They talked about the children, their gardens, and cooking. Misha would even show some interest.

"How do you live without a man?"

"But I have Janek."

"You know what I mean."

Stasha did not know what to say. She stirred her coffee.

"It's hard living without a man," she would think at night while in bed. Stasha's breasts and belly wanted to hold themselves against a man's body, hard and smelling of work in the sun. Stasha would roll up the pillow and embrace it like it was another body. That was how she slept.

In Longago, there was no store. All the shopping was done in Jeszkotle, and Stasha hit upon an idea. She borrowed one hundred zloties from Misha and bought a few bottles of vodka and some chocolate. It would always happen that someone needed half a liter of vodka at night. Sometimes a person wanted to have a drink with a neighbor under a linden tree. The people from Longago quickly learned that Stasha Parrot had some bottles, and that she was selling them for just a bit more than in a store. They would buy chocolate for the wife so she would not get mad.

In this way, Stasha started up a business. Pavel got upset with her. But eventually, even he sent Vitek to her for a bottle.

"You know who this could be bad for?" he asked her, his eyebrows tightly knitted. But Stasha was sure that if something happened, pray to God it did not, her brother, after all, had connections, and would not let something happen to her.

She shortly began going to Jeszkotle for merchandise two or three times a week. Her assortment also expanded. She had baking powder and vanilla, things that any one might suddenly need while cooking a cake on a Saturday. She had different brands of cigarettes, vinegar, and oil, and when, after a year, she bought herself a refrigerator, she also started brining butter and margarine. She kept everything in the room that had been added onto the house by her father, who had built everything else. The refrigerator stood in there, as well as the couch that Stasha slept on. There was a stove, a table, and shelves covered with a curtain. The room had not been used since Janek had gone to school in Silesia.

The illicit sale of alcohol, which was the name of Stasha's business in official language, enormously enriched her social life. Various people would visit her,

sometimes even from Jeszkotle and Vola. On Sunday mornings, hung over forest laborers would come on their bikes. Some would buy a whole half liter, others a quarter, and yet others would only ask for a glass of vodka on the spot. Stasha would pour them a shot, and treat them to a pickle as a chaser.

One day, a young ranger appeared at Stasha's for vodka. It was a hot day so she asked him to sit down and drink some juice. He thanked her and drank two glasses in a single gulp.

"This is good juice. Did you make it yourself?"

Stasha nodded. She did not know why, but her heart began pounding. The ranger was a handsome man, though still very young. Too young. He was not tall, but stout. He had a beautiful black moustache and lively hazel eyes. She neatly wrapped his bottle in some newspaper. The ranger came back again, and again she gave him some juice. They chatted for a moment. And then, one evening, he knocked at the door when she was already undressing for bed. He was tipsy. She quickly put on a dress. This time he did not want a bottle to go. He wanted to drink. She poured him some vodka in a glass, sat on the edge of the couch, and watched him gulp down the vodka. He lit a cigarette and looked around the room. He cleared his throat as if he wanted to say something. Stasha felt that it was an amazing moment. She took out another glass and filled them both. They clinked their glasses. The ranger drank up and shook the last drops out onto the floor. Then, suddenly, he put his hand on Stasha's knee. His touch, alone, made her so weak that she leaned back and lay on the couch. The ranger fell on top of her and started kissing her neck. Then Stasha remembered that she was wearing an old, patched

bra and stretched out underwear. So, as he was kissing he, she slid out of both. The ranger penetrated her abruptly, and those were the most beautiful minutes of Stasha's life.

When it was all over, she was afraid to move beneath him. He got up without looking at her, and buttoned his trousers. He mumbled something, and started straight for the door. She watched as he clumsily struggled with the lock. He left without even closing the door behind him.

The Time of Izydor

Letters fascinated Izydor ever since he had learned how to read and write. He would collect all the letters that came to the Boskis in a shoebox. Most often, there were notes from officials, and he came to recognize them from the "Cit." for "citizen" or the "Coll." for "colleague" written on the envelope. Inside there were many mysterious abbreviations, such as "i.e.," and "etc." There were also many postcards lying in the box with black and white panoramas of the Tatras, or a picture of a black and white sea. Every year the same thing would be written on them: "Warm greetings from Krynica," or "Heartfelt Greetings from the High Tatras," or "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." From time to time, Izydor would take out the continuously expanding collection and see how the ink had faded, how strangely distant the dates had become. What happened to "Easter, 1948," to "December 20, 1949," to "Krynica, August '51?" What did it mean that they had passed by? Did they pass away like the views that people leave behind them as they walk but that remain somewhere, surviving for other people's eyes?

Or maybe time prefers to cover its tracks, scattering the past like dust, destroying it forever.

Thanks to the postcards, Izydor discovered stamps. It boggled his mind that they were so tiny, so delicate, and so susceptible to destruction, and yet contained miniature worlds within themselves. "Just like people," he would think, and carefully peal them from envelopes and postcards above the steam from the teapot. He set the stamps on a newspaper and looked over them for hours. There were animals on them, and far off lands, precious stones, and fish from distant seas, ships, and planes, famous people, and historical events. The only thing that bothered Izydor was that their delicate pictures were damaged by the traces of ink from the rubber stamps. Before his father died, he had showed him how to remove the ink from the stamps using a rather simple household method. All that was needed was some egg white and a little patience. That was the most important thing he ever learned from his father.

In this way, Izydor became the owner of a sizeable collection of totally clean stamps. Now, he could write letters himself, if he had had someone to write to. He thought about Ruta, and every such thought pained him. There was no Ruta, and he could not write a letter to her. Ruta, like time, had passed him by, and crumbled into dust.

Somewhere around 1962, Ukleja sent a colorful German magazine with advertisements to the Boskis house. Izydor looked them over for days and could not stop being amazed with these long, unpronounceable words. He dug out a German-Polish dictionary, from before the war, from the district library. There were many more German words in it than the *raus*, *schnell*, and *Hande hoch*, which every resident of Longago had

learned during the war. Then, one of the vacationers gave Izydor a small dictionary, and Izydor wrote the first letter of his life. In German: "Please send me auto and tourist brochures. My name is Izydor Niebieski. This is my address." He pasted a few of his most beautiful stamps onto the envelope, and wandered off to the post office in Jeszkotle. The postal clerk, in a black, gleaming apron, took his letter, looked over the stamps and slipped it into a kind of box.

"That's all. Thank you," she said.

Izydor shuffled his feat uneasily, and stayed at the little window.

"Will it not get lost? Will it get misplaced somewhere?"

"If you're nervous about it you can send it registered. It just costs a bit more."

Izydor stuck on more stamps and filled out a long form. The clerk gave the letter a number.

After a few weeks, a letter in a fat, white envelope came, addressed to Izydor in typewriting. It had strange, completely different stamps that Izydor could not get accustomed to. Inside there were advertisements for cars from the firm Mercedes-Benz, as well as tourist brochures from various tourist bureaus. Izydor had never felt so important in his life. And again, he would think about Ruta in the evenings, as he would look over his brochures once more.

Mercedes-Benz and the German tourist bureaus inspired Izydor so much that he began sending several registered letters every month. He also asked Adelka and Antek, who were going to a school with a dormitory somewhere past Kielce, to bring him all their old stamps. After removing the ink, he would paste them to his own letters.

Sometimes, he was able to sell one of his brochures for a small bit of money. He would still get new brochures and new addresses.

He established contact with different tourist firms, German, Swiss, Belgian, and French. He would get color stills from the Côte d'Azure, brochures showing the sullen landscape of Brittany and the crystal clear view of the Alps. He would look at them whole nights with delight, even though he knew that they only existed for him on smooth paper smelling of paint. He showed Misha and his nieces. Misha said:

"How beautiful."

Then, something happened which was rather unimportant, but which still changed Izydor's life.

A letter was lost. It was a registered letter that Izydor had sent to a camera production firm in Hamburg. With a request for a brochure, of course. The firm had always replied to him, but now there was no answer. All night, Izydor wondered how a registered letter could be lost since he had filled out a receipt and gotten a number. Should that not have been a guarantee of indestructibility? Maybe it had been held up in Poland? Maybe a drunken mailman had lost it? Maybe there had been a flood, or a train carrying the mail had derailed?

The next morning, Izydor went to the post office. The clerk in the black apron advised him to register a complaint. On a form with two pieces of carbon paper he wrote down the name of the firm, and in the blank for "sender," he gave all his information. He went home, but he could not think of anything else. If letters could be lost in the post office, then it was not the post office he had so admired, the post office as a secret, mighty organization, having its people in every place on the Earth. The post office. A

power, the mother of all stamps, the queen of every navy blue mailman in the world, guardian of millions of letters, the Ruler of Words.

Two months later, when the mental wound Izydor had suffered from the post office had begun to heal, an official letter came in the mail. In it, the Polish Post apologized "To Citizen Niebieskim, Izydor" for being unable to find the lost letter. At the same time, the German camera production firm stated that they had never received any registered letter from "Cit. Niebieski, Izydor." And so, the post offices of both countries felt responsible for the lost letter, and proposed that the "injured Cit. Niebieski Izydor" be compensated to the amount of two hundred zloties. The Polish Post also apologized for the incident.

In this way, Izydor became the owner of a large sum of money. He immediately gave Misha one hundred zloties, and with the rest, he bought himself a stamp album, and a few sheets of stamps for sending registered letters.

Now, whenever there was no answer to any letter, he would go to the post office and fill out a complaint. If a letter was found, he had to pay 1 zloty 50 groszes for the price of the form. That was not so much. And besides, it always happened that one out of a dozen letters he sent was either lost, or was forgotten to be delivered, or the foreign addressees forgot that they had received it. He would be surprised with the printing that the post office would send him: *non, nein, no.*

Izydor was making money. He became a full member of the family. He had managed to earn a living.

The Time of Kloska

In Longago, like everywhere in the world, there are places where matter creates itself, it comes into being on its own. They are always just mere lumps of reality, unimportant to the whole, and unthreatening to the balance of the world.

Such a place is along the Volska Road, on a slope. It looks inconspicuous, like a molehill, like an innocent little wound on the body of the Earth that never heals. Only Kloska knows of it, and stands on the rode to Jeszkotle to look at the self-creation of the world. Strange things and non-things are found there, like a red stone unlike any other stone, a piece of a gnarled tree, thorny seeds that grow into sickly flowers in her garden, an orange fly, and sometimes just a smell. Kloska had the impression that the inconspicuous molehill also created space, that the slope next to the road was slowly getting bigger, and that because of this, every year, the Malaks' potato fields, unbeknownst to them, were slowly getting bigger.

It got into Kloska's head that, some day, she would find a child there, a girl, and she would take her home to fill the empty space left by Ruta. One autumn, however, the molehill disappeared. For the next few months, Kloska tried to find the bubbling space, but nothing happened. She finally accepted that the self-creating faucet had moved somewhere else.

A second such place appeared after some time in the fountain on the market square in Taszov. The fountain produced sounds, whispers, rustlings. Sometimes, a gelatinous substance would be found, matted balls of hair, green pieces of a large plant. The people believed that the fountain was haunted, so they decided to demolish it and build a parking lot over it.

Of course, in Longago, as everywhere in the world, there exists a place where reality curls up and leaks out of the world like air from a balloon. It had appeared in a meadow behind the mountain immediately after the war, and since then it had grown more and more distinct. In the ground, a crater formed which would pull down golden sand, tufts of grass, and stones.

The Time of the Game

The *Ignis Fatuu: or the Instructive Game for One Player* is strange, as are the instructions. Sometimes, the player gets the impression that he has already experienced all of it, that he has once played something similar, or that he knows the Game from dreams, or maybe from some books from a local library that he would visit as a child. The instructions discuss the subject of the Sixth World:

> God created the Sixth World accidentally, and then left it. He just threw it together with makeshift materials. In his creation there were holes and defects. Nothing was obvious, nothing was permanent. Black would run into white, and evil sometimes seemed good, just as good often looked like evil. Left to itself, the Sixth World began to create itself on its own. Tiny acts of creation appeared out of nowhere in time and space. Matter was able to bud in a thing by itself. At night, objects would replicate themselves, stones and veins of metal would grow in the Earth, and new rivers began flowing through valleys.

People learned to create the strength of their own will, and called themselves God. The world was now full of a million gods. But a will that is subservient is only an urge, and so chaos returned to the Sixth World. There was too much of everything, even though new things were still coming into existence. Time accelerated, and people died from the strain of doing something that had not yet been.

Finally, God returned and, impatient with the mess, destroyed the entire creation with a single thought. Now, the Sixth World stands empty and hollow, like a concrete tomb.

The Time of Izydor

Once, when Izydor went to the post office with a file of letters, the clerk in the gleaming apron suddenly put her face to the window and said:

"The postmaster is very pleased with you. He said you're our best customer."

Izydor stopped moving the indelible pencil over the complaint form.

"How's that? I'm hurting the post office, aren't I? I mean, it's all legal, I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Oh, Izydor, you don't understand." The woman bent down to the middle of the window. "The post office is making money from you. That's why the postmaster is happy, that there's someone like you at our post. You see, agreements between countries are such that for every lost international letter, post offices of both countries pay half.

We pay you in zloties, and they in marks. We convert the marks for you according to the national rate, all according to regulations. You make money, and we do too. Actually, no one even loses either. Well, aren't you happy?"

Izydor nodded his head uncertainly.

"Yes, I am."

The clerk moved back from the window. She took the complaint forms from Izydor and began mechanically stamping them.

When he got home, a black car was standing in front of the house. Misha was already waiting at the door. Her face was gray and still. Izydor immediately understood that something terrible had happened.

"These men are here to see you," Misha said in a hollow voice.

In the living room, two men in light colored trench coats and hats were sitting at the table. It was about the letters.

"Who are you writing these letters to?" one of the men asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Well, to tourist bureaus."

"It stinks of espionage."

"What would I be spying about? Oh, thank God! You know, sir, when I saw the car, I thought something had happened to the children."

The men exchanged looks, and the one with the cigarette looked at Izydor ominously.

"Why all the colorful papers?" the second one suddenly asked.

"I'm interested in the world."

"You're interested in the world. What are you so interested in the world for? You know what can happen to you for espionage?"

The man made a quick movement across his neck.

"Your throat's cut?" Izydor asked anxiously.

"Why don't you work? What do you live off of? What do you do?"

Izydor felt his hands sweating, and he began to stutter.

"I wanted to go to the monastery, but they wouldn't take me. I help my sister and brother-in-law. I cut trees. I play with the children. I might get some kind of disability pension."

"A section eight," the one with the cigarette muttered. "Where do you send these letters? Maybe to Radio Free Europe?"

"Only to auto companies and tourist bureaus."

"What's your connection to Ukleja's wife?"

Only after a second did Izydor realize they were talking about Ruta.

"You could say, everything and nothing."

"Without the philosophy."

"We were born on the same day, and I wanted to marry her. But she left."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"No. Do you?" Izydor asked hopefully.

"That's none of your business. I'm asking the questions."

"Gentlemen, I'm innocent. The Polish Post is even pleased with me. They just told me so."

The men stood to leave. One turned around and said:

"Remember, we're watching you."

A few days later, Izydor got a crumpled, soiled envelope with some foreign stamps that he had never seen before. He instinctively looked at the sender's name and read: Amanita Muscaria.

Those words seemed strangely familiar to him. "Maybe it's a German firm," he thought.

But the letter was from Ruta. He guessed it as soon as he saw the awkward, childish handwriting. "Dear Izzy," she wrote, "I am very far away, in Brazil. Sometimes I can't sleep, I miss you all so much. And sometimes, I don't think about any of you at all. I have a lot of things to do here. I live in a huge city full of people of every color. How's is your health? I hope that my mother is also well. I miss her a lot, but I know that she would not be able to live here. I have everything I've ever wanted. Don't tell anyone hello from me, not even my mother. I hope they forget about me quickly. Amanita Muscaria."

Izydor did not sleep until morning. He lay and looked at the ceiling. Images and smells came back to him from times when Ruta was still there. He remembered every one of her words, every gesture. He played them back one after another. When the sun's rays reached the east windows in the roof, tears began streaming down Izydor's eyes. Then he sat up and looked for an address on the envelope, on the paper, even under the stamps and in their intricate pictures. But he did not find it.

"I'll go to her. I'll get some money together and go to Brazil," he said to himself loudly.

Then he thought of an idea that the Secret Police had accidentally suggested to him. He tore a piece of paper from his notebook, and wrote: "Please send me a brochure. Thank you, Izydor Niebieski." On the envelope he wrote the address: "Radio Free Europe, Munich, Germany."

The clerk at the post office turned pale when she saw the address. Wordlessly, she gave him the form for the registered letter.

"I'd also like a form for the complaint now," Izydor said.

That was a very simple business. Izydor sent that kind of letter once a month. He knew that not only would it never reach the address, but it would not even leave the district. Every month he received compensation for the letters. Finally, he began simply putting a blank sheet of paper into the envelope. There was no longer any sense in asking for a brochure. That was a great way to make money, which Izydor then put into an empty Unra tea canister, to save for a ticket to Brazil.

In the spring of the next year, the agents in the trench coats took Izydor to Taszov. They shined a lamp into his eyes.

"Code," one of them said.

"What 'code?'" Izydor asked.

The second one slapped him across the face.

"Give us the code. How do you code your information?"

"What information?" Izydor asked.

They slapped him again, this time harder. He felt his lip bleeding.

"We've checked every word with every possible method, every square centimeter of the letter and envelope. We sliced the paper. We checked the stamps. We enlarged

them a hundred times. We examined the serration under a microscope and tested the glue. We analyzed every letter, every comma, and every period."

"We didn't find anything," said the one that had hit him.

"There aren't any codes there," Izydor said quietly, wiping the blood from his mouth with a handkerchief.

Both men laughed.

"Fine, fine," said the first one. "Let's say that we start over again from the beginning. We won't do anything to you. We'll write in the report that you're not completely normal. That's what everyone thinks about you anyway. We'll even let you go home. And for that, you tell us how to figure this out. Where did we make a mistake?"

"There's nothing there."

The second one was really angry. He put his face against Izydor's. He smelled of cigarettes.

"Listen smart ass. You've sent twenty-six letters to Radio Free Europe. Most of them were blank. You've been playing with fire, and now you've asked for it!"

Izydor sighed.

"I can see that this is important to you, but, honestly, I don't know how to help you. There weren't any codes there. They were just blank pages, nothing more.

Then, one of the agents jumped out of his chair and punched Izydor in the face. Izydor slid out of the chair and passed out.

"He's crazy," said the first one.

"Remember, buddy, we'll never leave you alone," the second one drawled, rubbing his fist.

Izydor was held for forty-eight hours. Then a guard came to him and wordlessly opened the door.

Izydor did not come down from his attic for the entire week. He counted the money he had saved in the tea canister, and thought that he had a real fortune. After all, he did not know how much a ticket to Brazil might cost.

"I'm finished with the letters," he told Misha when he came into the kitchen. She smiled at him and sighed with relief.

The Time of Dolly

The present is always the time of animals.

Dolly is red and hairy dog. She has brown eyes that sometimes glow red. Dolly loves Misha the most, so she tries to always keep Misha within the range of her red sight. Then, everything is in its place. Dolly follows Misha to the well and garden. She goes with her to the Highway to take a look at the world. She never lets Misha out of the embrace of her eyes.

Dolly does not think the same way as Misha or other people. In that sense, a gulf exists between Dolly and Misha, because, in order to think, it is necessary to drink down time, to internalize the past, the present, the future, and their constant changes. Time works inside the human mind. It is nowhere outside. In Dolly's tiny, dog mind there are no wrinkles, no organs that filter the flow of time. So, Dolly lives in the present. That is why when Misha dresses and leaves, Dolly believes that she has left forever. Forever,

she goes every Sunday, to church. Forever, she goes down to the cellar for potatoes. When she disappears from Dolly's sight, she disappears forever. Then, Dolly's sadness is limitless. She lays her head on the ground and suffers.

People connect time to their suffering. They suffer because of the past, and extend their suffering into the future. This creates despair. Dolly suffers only here and now.

Human thought is inseparably tied to the drinking of time. It is a kind of choking. Dolly sees the world as a static picture that God painted. For animals, God is a painter. He stretches the world out in front of them in the shape of panoramic views. The heart of this painting is located in smells, in touches, tastes, and noises, in which there is no sense. Sense is not necessary for animals. People sometimes experience something similar when they dream. But, in the light, people need sense because they are prisoners of time. Animals dream incessantly and futilely. Awaking from a dream is death for them.

Dolly lives through the pictures of the world. She takes part in the pictures that people create in their mind. When Misha says "we're going" and sees that Dolly is wagging her tail, she thinks that Dolly understands words like people. Dolly wags her tail not because of a word, not because of an idea, but because of a picture that buds from Misha's mind. In this picture there is the expectation of movement, changing landscapes, waving grass, the Volska Road leading to the forest, grasshoppers playing, and the river murmuring. Dolly, as she lies, gazing at Misha, sees the pictures that people inadvertently create. This vision is crowded with sadness or anger. These kinds of pictures are clearer because passion beats within them. Then, Dolly is defenseless, because she does not have anything within her that can defend her from these strange,

gloomy worlds. There are no magical, protective layers of identity, no "I" equipped with powerful energy given to her. So, she is left, conquered by them. That is why dogs recognize people as their masters. That is why even the meanest people can seem like heroes to their dogs.

The ability to go through emotions does not distinguish anything between Dolly and Misha.

Dolly knows there is a God. She perceives him constantly, and not, like humans, only in rare moments. Dolly can smell him in the grass because time does not separate her from God. That is why Dolly has within herself a trust for the world that no person has. The Lord Jesus had a similar trust as he hanged upon the cross.

The Time of Popielski's Grandchildren

Immediately after the end of the school year, the Baroness Popielska, the same who had once walked about the park with her big dog, brought her children and her brother's children to Longago. Misha prepared three rooms for them upstairs, and if there were a need, she would also prepare rooms downstairs. So, at the end of June, Pavel Boski's dream of a pension began working at full speed.

The Baron Popielski's grandchildren were robust and noisy. They had no features that made them resemble the Baron. And, as always happens in good families, there were only boys and one girl. The same nanny looked after them every year. The nanny's name was Zuzanna.

The children would sit all day at the river, in the place called the Sink, where young people from all over the area would come to swim in the Black. The Baron

Popielski had once built a water gate on the river to regulate the flow of water to his ponds. Now, the ponds no longer existed, but the skillful manipulation of the water gate allowed the creation of a lagoon and a waterfall a few meters high. Grandfather Popielski would certainly never have allowed his grandchildren to have that kind of fun.

The children would return for lunch, which Misha would often serve in the garden under the apple trees. After lunch, they would again go back to the river. In the evenings, Zuzanna would organize games of cards and anything else for them as long as they were quiet. Sometimes, Vitek, who was not too much older than them, would make a bonfire for them on the other side of the mountain.

Every year, on Saint John's night, Popielski's grandchildren would go into the forest to find the fern blossom. This expedition became a ritual, and one year, Zuzanna let them go alone. The Baron's grandchildren took advantage of the occasion and, so that no one would find out, bought a bottle of cheap wine in Jeszkotle. They took some sandwiches, bottles of orangeade, sweets and flashlights. They sat on the bench in front of the house and waited until it finally got dark. They laughed and made a lot of noise, enjoying the hidden bottle.

The Baron Popielski's grandchildren only grew quiet once they got to the forest, not because the mood had been ruined, but because the forest seemed terrible and powerful in the dark. They had bravely wanted to go to Wodenica, but the dark had changed their minds. Wodenica was a haunted place. They went into the alder forest where the most ferns grew. They were drinking wine and smoking banned cigarettes like peasants from Longago.

The children walked toward the river in a row, holding onto each others shoulders.

It was so dark that their stretched out hands seemed like barely visible stains against the blackness. Only the sky seemed brighter than the world shrouded in darkness, a majestic, celestial colander punctured with stars.

The forest was acting like an animal, warding away anyone from approaching it. It shook dew onto them. It sent an owl. It had rabbits suddenly jump over their feet.

The children went into the alder forest and picnicked blindly. The ends of their cigarettes glowed dimly. The wine, which they were drinking for the first time in their lives, was giving them some courage. They ran around, looking for the fern blossom, until one of them found something shining. The forest murmured uneasily. The one who had found it called the others. He was excited.

"I think I have it, I think I have it," he said.

In among the tangled blackberry bushes, in the damp fern leaves, something silver shimmered. The children parted the huge leaves with sticks, and in the light of their flashlights saw an empty can shining on the ground. The disappointed child who had found it picked it up with a stick and threw it far into the bushes.

The baron's grandchildren sat a while longer to finish the wine, and then returned to the road.

Only then did the empty can bloom, casting an unbelievable, silver light around itself.

Kloska, who always gathered herbs on the night of the solstice, saw it, but she was already too old to make any wishes, and she knew how many problems can come about with the fern blossom. She walked around it at a distance.

The Time of the Baron Popielski

"Misha, would you like to drink some tea with me when you've finished," asked Popielski's daughter, who still had a girlish figure.

Misha straightened up from above the pans full of dirty dishes and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Not tea, but I'd love some coffee."

They walked under an apple tree with a tray and sat at both sides of the table. Lila finished the washing up with Maya.

"It must be difficult for you, Misha. To serve so many lunches, wash so many dishes. We're very grateful to you for your effort. If it weren't for all of you we'd have nowhere to come to. And it's even our family's area."

The young lady Popielska, who had once long, long ago, ran about the meadows with her big dogs, sighed sadly.

"And if it weren't for you, we wouldn't survive on Pavel's wages. Renting out the rooms is my contribution to maintaining the family."

"You can't think like that, Misha. After all, a woman works in the home, she gives birth to the children, she takes care of the household, you know better than I."

"But she doesn't make any wages, she doesn't bring in any money."

Some wasps flew onto the table and delicately licked the frosting of a gingerbread cookie. They did not bother Misha, but the young lady Popielska was afraid of wasps.

"When I was little, a wasp stung me on the eyelid. I was alone with my father. Mama had gone to Cracow. That could have been thirty-five, thirty-six years ago. Father fell into a panic. He ran around the house screaming at me, and then took me somewhere in the car. I barely remember it. We went to some Jews in the village."

The young lady Popielska leaned her chin on her hand, and her gaze wandered between the leaves of the apple trees and lindens.

"The Baron Popielski. That was an outstanding man," Misha said.

The brown eyes of the young lady Popielska glazed over, and looked like drops of honey. Misha guessed that her private, internal stream of time, the kind all people carry within themselves, had turned around, and in the spaces between the leaves of the trees, she was looking at pictures from the past.

When they went to Cracow, the Popielskis had to live from hand to mouth. They lived off selling their good silver, which broke their hearts. The large Popielski family had been scattered about the world. They had helped their cousins with as much money in dollars or zloties as was possible. The Baron Popielski had been charged with cooperating with the occupiers, because he had sold the Germans trees. He sat in jail for a few months, but was finally released due to his mental condition, which a paid off psychiatrist had exaggerated a little, but not much.

The Baron Popielski would pace all day, back and forth, from one wall to the other in his cramped apartment on Salvatore Street, and stubbornly tried to lay out his

Game on one table. However, his wife would watch him with such a look that he would put everything back into its box, and immediately go out for a never ending walk.

Time flowed on, and the Baroness left a little space in her prayers to thank it that it was flowing, that it was moving on, and that it was introducing changes into peoples' lives. The family, the entire huge Popielski family, again gathered its strength and opened a small business in Cracow. Within the framework of the unwritten family agreement, the Baron Popielski was assigned to supervise the production of shoes, specifically shoe soles. He oversaw the work of the small plant, where the press that had been imported from the West would push out plastic soles for sandals. From the beginning, he did it very unwillingly, but then the entire enterprise began to interest him, and eventually, as it tended to be with the Baron, it completely absorbed him. It fascinated him that such an irregular, indeterminate substance could be made into so many various shapes. He even began to experiment. He was able to create a completely transparent mass, and then gave it different shades and colors. It happened that he had had a good sense of the spirit of the times in the field of women's shoes. His plastic winter boots with shiny tops sold like crazy.

"Father even made himself a little laboratory. He was always like that, whatever he did, he put all of himself into it, and that gave it some kind of absolute sense. In that respect he was unbearable. He behaved as though those soles and boots were supposed to save humanity. He'd play with test tubes, with distillation. He'd weigh something and heat something up.

"He finally contracted a skin disease from his chemical experiments. Maybe from burns or radiation. At any rate, he looked awful. His skin was peeling off in pieces. The

doctors said that it was a kind of skin cancer. We took him to family in France, to the best doctors, but there's no treatment for skin cancer, here or there. At least, there wasn't any then. What was strangest was the way he treated his disease. We already knew it was fatal by then. 'I'm molting,' he said, and he looked so pleased with himself, even proud."

"He was a strange man," Misha said.

"But he wasn't crazy," the young lady Popielska quickly added. "He had a restless spirit. I think that he experienced a shock with that war and then leaving the palace. The world after the war had changed so much. He couldn't find himself in it, and that's why he died. He was conscious and cheerful to the end. I didn't understand that. I thought that all the pain had mixed him up. You know, he suffered terribly. The cancer finally attacked his entire body, and he just repeated that he was molting, like a child."

Misha sighed and drank up the rest of her coffee. On the bottom of the glass, the brown lava of grains stiffened, and a sunny reflection gleamed off the top of it.

"He wanted to be buried with that strange box, and we forgot about it in the chaos of preparing the funeral. I feel terrible that we didn't fulfill his wishes. After the funeral, we looked in it with mother, and you know what we found? A piece of old canvas, wooden dice, and different figurines. Animals, people, and objects like children's toys. And a worn out old book, with some incomprehensible nonsense. We dumped it all out on the table with mother, and we couldn't believe that these little toys had been so valuable to him. I remember them, like it was yesterday. Small brass figurines of women and men, animals, trees, houses, palaces, miniature objects, like a

book the size of a small fingernail, a coffee mill with a crank, a red mailbox, wooden yokes with buckets, everything made with precision."

"What did you do with them?" Misha asked.

"First, everything just lay in the drawer where we kept the photo albums. Then the children played with them. They must still be in the house somewhere, maybe in with their blocks? I don't know. I'll have to ask. I still feel guilty that we didn't put them in the coffin."

The young lady Popielska bit her lips and her eyes glazed over once again.

"I understand him," Misha said after a moment. "I had a drawer of my own like that, where all my most important things were."

"But you were a child then. He was a grown man."

"There's Izydor."

"Maybe every normal family has to have that kind of safety fuse of normality, someone who takes on all the pieces of insanity that we carry in ourselves."

"Izydor isn't how he seems," Misha said.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything bad by it. My father wasn't crazy either. And, maybe he was?"

Misha quickly denied it.

"What scares me the most, Misha, is that his strangeness could be hereditary, and that it could happen to one of my children. But I look after them. They're learning English, and I want to send them to our family in France so they can see a bit of the world. I'd like them to finish their studies, like computer science, economics somewhere in the West, some kind of concrete specialty that will give them something. They swim,

they play tennis, they're interested in art and literature. You'll see yourself that they're healthy and normal children."

Misha followed the young lady Popielska's gaze and saw the Baron's grandchildren just returning from the river. They had colorful bathrobes, and they were holding diving gear in their hands. They noisily pushed their way through the gate.

"Everything will be fine," said the young lady Popielska. "The world is different than before. It's better, bigger, clearer. There are vaccines against diseases, there's no war, and people are living longer. Do you think so too?"

Misha looked into her glass with the grains and shook her head.

The Time of the Game

In the Seventh World, the descendents of the first people wandered about together from country to country, until they came across an unusually beautiful valley. "Come on," they said, "let's build ourselves a city, and a tower that reaches the sky, so that we might become one nation, and so that God will not scatter us." And immediately they set to work, setting stones with tar instead of mortar. They built a great city, in the center of which a tower grew until it was so high that one could see what lay beyond the Eight Worlds from its peak. Sometimes, when the sky was clear, those who were working the highest had to raise their hands to

their eyes so the sun would not blind them, and they saw the feet of God, and the outline of the great hulk of a giant snake devouring time.

Some of them tried to reach even higher with sticks.

God glanced at them, and thought uneasily: "As long as they remain one people, speaking one tongue, they will be able to do anything they can think of. I will mix up their tongues, I will lock them in themselves, and I will make them unable to understand one another. Then they will turn against one another, and they will leave me alone." That was what God did.

The people scattered into every corner of the world, and became each other's enemies. But the memory of what they had seen survived within them. And those who see the borders of the world once experience their imprisonment all the more painfully.

The Time of Missus Parrot

Every Monday, Stasha Parrot went to the fair in Taszov. On Mondays the buses were so full that they would pass by the bus stop in the forest without stopping. So Stasha had to stand on the side of the road and hail cars. First Sirens drove by, then Warsaws, then big and small Fiats. She would clamber awkwardly into the car and chat with the drivers, always beginning in the same way:

"Do you happen to know Pavel Boski?"

It would happen that they did.

"That's my brother. He's an inspector."

The drivers would turn their faces to her and look at her suspiciously. So she would repeat herself:

"I'm Pavel Boski's sister."

They would never believe her.

In her old age Stasha had shrunk and grown fat. Her prominent nose had gotten bigger, and her eyes had lost their glow. Her feet were always swollen, so she had to wear men's sandals. There were only two of her beautiful teeth left. Time had not been kind to Stasha Parrot. It was not at all strange that people did not want to believe that she was inspector Boski's sister.

Once, in a busy Monday market, a car hit her. She lost her hearing. The incessant hum inside her head drowned out the sounds of the world. Sometimes, in this hum, voices and shreds of music would appear, but Stasha had no idea where they came from. Were they piercing through from the outside, or were they coming from within her? She would listen to them intently while darning socks or ceaselessly altering Misha's old clothes.

In the evenings she liked to go to the Boski's. In the summer it was especially busy at their house. People on vacation would rent the second floor. The children and grandchildren would come. They would move the table out to the orchard and drink vodka beneath the apple trees. Pavel would take out his violin, his children getting their instruments right behind him: Antek, the accordion, Adelka, coming after him with the violin, Vitek, the double bass, Lila and Maya, the guitar and flute. Pavel would give them a sign with his bow, and everyone would begin rhythmically moving their fingers,

swinging their heads and tapping the beat with their feet. They would always begin with *The Mountains of Manchuria*. She could tell what music they were playing by looking at their faces. While they played *The Mountains of Manchuria*, Michal Niebieski appeared in the children's features for a moment. "Is it possible," she wondered, "that the dead can continue to live in the bodies of their grandchildren?" And she also wondered whether she would continue to live in the faces of Janek's children.

Stasha missed her son. He had stayed in Silesia after finishing school. He would only visit rarely. Taking after his father, he would make her wait and wait for him. In early summer she would prepare his room, but he never wanted to stay long, unlike Pavel's children, who stayed for the entire vacation. He always left after a few days and then would forget to take the juices that she had been making for him the entire year. He would, however, take the money his mother had made on selling vodka.

She walked with him to the bus stop on the Kielce highway. A stone was lying at the intersection. Stasha picked it up and said:

"Put your hand here. I'll have something to remember you by."

Janek looked about him uneasily then pressed his hand into the ground. For a year the shape of his hand lay beneath the stone. Then, at Christmas and Easter, letters would come from him. They always began in the same way: "At the beginning, I'd like to inform you that I am healthy, and I wish Mama the same."

His wishes never carried any strength. He had probably been thinking of something else while he was writing. One winter, Stasha suddenly got sick, and before the ambulance could arrive, she forced her way through a snowdrift, and then died.

Janek arrived late, just as they were covering the grave and everyone had already left. He went to his mother's home and looked over everything for a long time. There were jars of juice, woven curtains, crocheted blankets, and boxes made with the postcards he had sent his mother on holidays and name's days. They probably were not worth much. The furniture from his grandfather Boski was worn. They would definitely not go with his own, highly polished furniture. The edges and handles of the teacups were all chipped. The snow had forced its way into the small shack through cracks in the door. Janek locked the house up, and went to give the key to his uncle.

"I don't want the house, or anything else that comes from Longago," he said to Pavel.

When he returned to the highway, he stopped at the stone, and after a moment of hesitation did exactly what he had done every year. This time he pressed his hand deep into the cold, half frozen ground, and held it there until his hands grew stiff from the chill.

The Time of Quadruplicities

From one year to the next, Izydor began to realize more and more that he would never leave Longago. He remembered the border in the forest, the invisible wall. That border was for him. Maybe Ruta had been able to go through it. He had neither the strength nor the desire to do so.

The house became deserted. Only in the summer did it liven up because of the vacationers, and then Izydor avoided leaving his attic altogether. He was afraid of people he did not know. The previous winter, Ukleja had come to the Boski's. He had aged and

grown even fatter. His face was gray, swollen, and his eyes were bloodshot from vodka. He sat at the table, looking like a pile of tainted meat, and started incessantly bragging with his hoarse voice. Izydor could not stand him.

Ukleja probably felt it, and because he was as generous as the devil himself, he gave Izydor a present, some pictures of Ruta. It was a well thought out present. Ukleja had chosen the photos in which Ruta's naked body, cut into pieces by the strange lighting, covered the heap of his own bulk. A female face was visible only in a few of them–an open mouth, sweaty hair stuck to her cheeks.

Izydor looked over the pictures quietly, then put them on the table and went upstairs.

"Why'd you show him those pictures?" he heard Pavel's voice ask.

Ukleja burst out laughing.

From that day Izydor stopped going downstairs. Misha would take food to him in his attic, and then sit next to him on the bed. They would remain quiet for a moment, and then Misha would sigh and return to the kitchen.

He did not even want to get out of bed. It was good to lie and sleep. He still had the same dream, a vast expanse, filled with geometrical forms. A dull polyhedron, a transparent pyramid, and iridescent cylinders. They flowed over a wide plane that might have been the Earth, if there had been a sky above it. Instead, there was a great black hole gaping open. Watching it brought fear into the dream.

Silence reigned in his dream. Even when the great forms brushed up against each other, there was no grinding noise, no rustling.

In this dream there was no Izydor. There was only an alien observer, a witness of events from his life, who lived within Izydor, but was not him.

After such a dream Izydor's head would hurt, and he had to struggle to keep from sobbing. He did not know where it came from, but it stayed permanently in his throat.

Once, Pavel came to him. He said they were going to play in the garden, and that he should come with them. He looked about the attic approvingly.

"It's nice up here," he muttered.

Winter came about with Izydor's sadness. When he would look at the naked, gray fields, the damp sky, it reminded him of the same view he had after meeting Ivan Mukta. A portrait of the world without sense, without God. Terrified, he rubbed his eyes, wanting to erase the vision from his memory forever. But being fed with sadness, the picture had the tendency to grow stronger. It seized his body and soul. Izydor felt older. His bones hurt every time the weather changed. The world began tormenting him in every possible way. Izydor did not know what do with himself, where to hide.

This lasted for a few months, until an instinct awoke inside him, and Izydor decided to save himself. When he went down to the kitchen for the first time, Misha burst into tears, and held him to her apron, which smelled of lunch.

"You smell like Mama," he said.

Now, once a day, he would slowly descend the stairs, and mindlessly stack twigs in the fire. Misha was forever cooking milk, or soup, and that familiar safe aroma would bring him back to the repellent, empty world. He would get something to eat and, muttering beneath his breath, go back upstairs.

"You could chop some wood," Misha would snap at him.

He would chop some wood gratefully. He filled the entire woodshed with logs.

"You can stop chopping that wood," she said angrily.

So he took Ivan's binoculars from a box, and surveyed all of Longago from his four windows. He looked to the east, and on the horizon saw the houses in Taszov, and in front of them the forests and fields along the White. He saw Mrs. Niechcialova, who lived in Mrs. Florentynka's house, milking a cow.

He looked to the south, at the chapel of Saint Roch, and at the dairy, and the bridge to the village, and some lost car, and the postman. Then he went to the west window. It had a view of Jeszkotle, the Black, the River, the palace roof, the church tower, and the still expanding old people's home. Finally, he went to the north window and feasted his eyes on the great expanse of the forest, cut in two by the ribbon of the Kielce highway. He would see the same landscape in every season of the year, the snow white winter, the green spring, the colorful summer, and the faded autumn.

Then, Izydor realized that most of the important things in the world are quadrupled. He took a sheet of gray paper and drew a table with a pencil. The table had four columns. In the first row Izydor wrote:

West North East South.

And right after that he added:

Winter Spring Summer Autumn.

And it seemed to him that he had set down the first few words of some extremely important sentence.

This sentence had to have a great power, because now all of Izydor's senses were directed to tracking quadruplicities. He looked for them around his attic, and then in the

garden after he had been told to weed out the cucumber patch. He found them in everyday work, in objects, in his habits, and in the fairy-tales he remembered from childhood. He felt that he was getting better, that he was coming out of a roadside thicket onto a straight road. Was everything starting to become clear? Was it not enough to exert one's mind a little, and recognize the order that was indeed lying within the scope of your eyesight? Was it not enough to just look?

Again he went to the district library and borrowed an entire sack of books, because he realized that most quadrupled things had already been written down.

In the library there were many books with the beautiful bookplate of the Baron Popielski, a bird standing atop a stone with outstretched wings like an eagle's. The bird was leaning his claws against the letters PHOENIX. Above the bird appeared the inscription: "Ex libris of Felix Popielski."

Izydor only borrowed books with the Phoenix, and the sign became the mark of a good book. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that the entire collection of books began only from the letter L. He could not find any authors with names from A to K on the shelves. So he read Lao-tsu, Lenin, Leibniz, Loyola, Lucian, Marcellus, Marx, Meyrink., Mickiewicz, Nietzsche, Aerogenes, Percales, Poe, Prus, Quevedo, Rousseau, Schiller, Slowacki, Spencer, Spinosa, Swentoniusz, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, Sienkiewicz, Towanski, Tacitus, Tertulian, Thomas of Aquinas, Verne, Virgil, Voltaire. The more he read, the more he missed the authors from the beginning of the alphabet: Augustine, Andersen, Aristotle, Avicenna, Blake, Chesterton, Dante, Darwin, Diogenes Laertios, Eckhart, Eriugeny, Euclid, Freud, Goethe, Grimm, Hein, Hegel, Hoffmann, Homer, Hölderlin, Hugo, Jung, Klemens. He also read the world encyclopedia at home, but it did

not make him either any smarter or better. He did get more and more written into his tables.

Some fours were obvious. It was enough to be attentive:

Sour Sweet Bitter Salty,

or:

Root Stem Flower Fruit,

or:

Green Red Blue Yellow,

or:

Left Up Right Down.

And also:

Eye Ear Nose Mouth.

He found many such quadruplicities in the Bible. Some of them seemed more primal, older, and that these gave birth to others. He had the impression that before his very eyes the fours were multiplying, that they were reproducing into infinity. He finally began to suspect that this same infinity must also be quadrupled, like the name of God:

I H V H.

The four prophets from the Old Testament:

Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekial Daniel.

The four rivers of Eden:

Pison Gihon Tigris Euphrates.

The faces of the cherubs:

Person Lion Ox Eagle.

The four Evangelists:

Matthew Mark Luke John.

The four cardinal virtues:

Courage Justice Prudence Abstinence

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse:

Pestilence War Famine Death

The four elements according to Aristotle:

Earth Water Wind Fire.

The four aspects of consciousness:

Perception Feeling Thought Intuition.

The four kingdoms in Cabal:

Mineral Plant Animal Human.

The four aspects of time:

Space Past Present Future.

The four ingredients of alchemy:

Salt Sulphur Nitrogen Mercury.

The four functions of alchemy:

Coagulatio Solutio Sublimatio Calcinatio.

The four holy syllables:

A O U M.

The four Sephardim of the cabal:

Grace Beauty Strength Domination.

The four states of existence:

Life	Dying and Death	the Period after death	Rebirth

The four states of consciousness:

Lethargy	Deep Sleep	Light Sleep	Wakefulness

The four qualities of creation:

Permanence	Fluidity	Volatility	Light.

The four human skills according to Galen:

Physical	Esthetic	Intellectual	Moral and Spiritual.

The four fundamental algebraic operations:

Addition	Subtraction	Multiplication	Division.

The four dimensions:

Width	Length	Height	Time.

The four states of concentration:

Solid	Fluid	Gas	Plasma

The four bases of DNA:

T	A	G	C.

The four humors according to Hippocrates:

Phlegmatic	Melancholic	Sanguine	Choleric.

The list did not finish there. It could not be finished, because then the world would also finish. That was what Izydor thought. He also thought that he had come across the trail of an order in this divine alphabet that ruled throughout the universe.

While he was hunting these quadruplicities, Izydor's mind began to change. In every thing, in the tiniest phenomenon, he saw four parts, four stages, four functions. He

saw fours following one another, budding into eights, and sixteens, in a constant fourfold transformation of the algebra of life. No longer did the budding apple trees in the orchard exist for him, but rather a quadrupled, united structure assembled from roots, trunks, leaves and blossoms. What was really interesting was that a quadruplicity is immortal. In the autumn, in the place of blossoms, there was fruit. Izydor had to think over the fact that in the winter there were only the trunks and roots left from the apple trees. He discovered the law of reduction of fours into twos. Two is a period of rest for fours. A four became a two as it slept, like a tree in winter.

Things that did not immediately show their inner quadruplicitous structure became challenges for Izydor. Once he was observing Vitek as he was trying to break a young horse. The horse bucked and threw him to the ground. Izydor thought that the system, known colloquially as "man on horse," only seemed to be made of two elements. Actually, first of all, the man and horse both existed. The third thing was the whole, that is to say the man on the horse. So, where was the fourth?

The centaur, something that was more than a man and a horse. It was a man and horse together, the child of a human and a horse, a human and a goat. Izydor suddenly understood, and once again he felt the same, long forgotten anxiety that Ivan Mukta had left him.

The Time of Misha

For a long time Misha did not want to cut her long gray hair. When Lila and Maya visited they brought a special dye, and that evening they returned her hair to its old color. They had an eye for color. They could choose exactly the kind she needed.

One day something suddenly came over her, and she forced herself to cut her hair. When the chestnut colored locks fell to the floor, Misha looked in the mirror, and understood that she was an old woman.

In the spring she wrote the young baroness that she would not be taking in summer vacationers. Neither that year nor the next.

Pavel tried to protest, but she would not listen to him. One night, a sudden throbbing of her heart and pulse awoke her. It made her hands and legs swell. She looked down at her feet, and did not recognize them. "Once I had slender fingers and thin bones. My calves used to flex whenever I walked in high heels," she thought to herself.

That summer, when the children came to visit, everyone except Adelka, they took her to the doctor. She had high blood pressure. She would have to take some pills, and she was told not to drink anymore coffee.

"What's the use of living if I can't drink coffee," she grumbled, taking her coffee mill from the cupboard.

"Mama, you're like a child," Maya said, and took the mill from her hands.

The next day, Vitek bought a large bag of decaffeinated coffee from the pevex. She pretended to like it, but when she was left alone, she would grind some of the real, precious coffee beans that you could only get with ration cards, and brew it in a glass.

With the grounds left in the bottom, the way she liked it. She would sit in the kitchen by the window and look out at the orchard. She would listen to the tall grass rustling. There was no longer anyone left that could trim it beneath the trees. She could see the Black from the window, the priest's meadows, and beyond them Jeszkotle, where some people were still building new houses with cement bricks. The world was no longer as beautiful as it once was.

One day, as she was drinking her coffee, some people came to see Pavel. She found out that Pavel had hired them to build a mausoleum.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" she asked.

"I wanted to surprise you."

On Sunday, they went to look at the deep pit. Misha did not like the place around the graves of old Boski and Stasha Parrot.

"Why not next to my parents?" she asked.

Pavel shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, why," he said, mocking her. "It's too crowded there."

Misha remembered the time she separated the marriage bed with Izydor.

As they walked home, she cast a glance at the inscription at the cemetery entrance.

"God sees. Time escapes. Death chases. Eternity waits," she read.

The year that followed was turbulent. Pavel would turn on the radio in the kitchen, and the three of them, with Izydor, would listen to the communiqués. They could not understand much of it. In the summer, the children and grandchildren visited. Not everyone. Antek did not get a vacation. At night they would sit in the garden until

late, drinking currant wine, discussing politics. Misha would instinctively glance at the gate, waiting for Adelka.

"She's not coming," Lila said.

In September the house was empty once again. Pavel would drive around his untilled fields on his motorcycle for days, looking over the mausoleum. Misha would call for Izydor to come downstairs, but he never wanted to. He would pour over the gray sheets of paper, onto which he had drawn never-ending graphs.

"Swear to me that if I'm the first to die, you won't put him in the old people's home," she said to Pavel.

"I swear."

On the first day of autumn, Misha was grinding a portion of the real coffee in her mill. She spooned it into a glass, and poured boiling water over it. She took some gingerbread from the cupboard. The kitchen filled with a wonderful aroma. She moved a chair to the window and drank her coffee in tiny sips. Then, the world in Misha's mind exploded, and its splinters fluttered about. She collapsed onto the floor, under the table. The spilled coffee dripped into her hand. Misha could not move, so she waited, like an animal caught in a trap, for someone to come release her.

They took her to the hospital in Taszov, where the doctors told them she had had a stroke. Pavel, Izydor and the girls visited her every day. They would sit by her bed talking to her the entire time, even though no one was sure Misha could even understand them. They would ask questions, and she would sometimes nod her head "yes" or shake "no." Her face had collapsed, and her eyes had rolled inward, becoming tarnished.

They went out to the hallway and tried to find out from the doctor what would happen to her. But the doctor looked concerned about something else. The white and red flag hung in every window of the hospital, and the personnel were all wearing strike armbands. So they stood by the hospital window and tried to make themselves understand this misfortune. Maybe she had hit her head and damaged everything inside, speech, the joy of life, interest in life, the will to live. Or something else. Maybe she fell and was terrified by the thought of how fragile she was, and that she was still living only by some miracle. It terrified her that she was mortal, and now, in before their eyes, she was dying from the fear of death.

They brought her compote and oranges that they had to spend a lot of money on. They slowly became reconciled with the thought that Misha would die. That she would go somewhere else. But what they feared most was that in her dying, in the separation of her spirit from her body, in the decay of her biological mind, Misha Boska would be lost forever, and all of her recipes would be lost, and the liver and radish salads would disappear, and her cocoa cakes with frosting, her gingerbread, even her thoughts, words, and the events she had taken part in, ordinary events, like her life, and yet lined with a darkness and sadness that the world is not friendly to a person, and the only thing people can do is find a shell for themselves and their neighbors, where they can stay until they are set free.

When they looked at Misha, sitting in the bed, her legs covered with a blanket, her face blank, they wondered what her thoughts looked like. Were they torn and disjointed like her words. Or maybe, hidden in the depth of her mind, they had kept all of their freshness and strength. Or maybe they had changed into clear pictures, full of colors.

They also took into account that Misha might have stopped thinking. That would mean that the shell was leaking, and that chaos and destruction had seized Misha while she still lived.

Misha died a month later. She had been seeing only the left side of the world the entire time. Her guardian angel, who always appeared at the most important moments, was waiting for her there.

The Time of Pavel

Because the mausoleum was still not ready, Pavel buried Misha next to Genovefa and Michal. He thought that she would like that. He was constantly busy with the building of the mausoleum, giving the workers more and more complicated orders, so the work dragged on. In that way, Pavel Boski, inspector, pushed back in time his own death.

After the funeral, when the children had left, it became very quiet in the house. Pavel felt uncomfortable in the silence. He would turn on the television and watch every channel. The national anthem at the end of the broadcast was the signal that it was time to go to bed. Only then could Pavel hear that he was not alone.

Upstairs, the floorboards would creak beneath Izydor's heavy, scraping step. He still did not come downstairs. The presence of his brother-in-law annoyed Pavel. So one day, he went to Izydor's attic, and persuaded him to move to the old people's home.

"You'll be taken care of there, and you'll get hot food," he said.

To his astonishment Izydor did not protest. The next day he was already packed. When Pavel saw the two cardboard suitcases and the grocery bag with clothes, they pricked his conscience, but only for a moment.

"He'll be taken care of, and he'll get hot food," he told himself now.

The first snowfall was in November, and then it snowed and snowed. There was a smell of mildew in the rooms, and Pavel got out an electric heater out from somewhere, which heated the room with difficulty. The television crackled from the mildew and cold, but it worked. Pavel followed the weather forecast and watched all the news broadcasts, even though none of it mattered to him. There was some kind of change in the government. Some figures would appear then disappear in the silver window. Before the holidays, his daughters came and took him home for Christmas Eve. On the second day of Christmas he told them to take him back home, and then he saw that beneath the snow, the roof of Stasha's shack had collapsed. The furniture was covered in a slight layer of snow: the empty cupboards, the table, the bed old Boski used to sleep on, and the bedside table. At first, Pavel wanted to save the things from the cold and frost, but then realized that he would not be able to get the heavy furniture out by himself. And for what after all?

"Papa, you built a lousy roof," he said to the furniture. "Your crap is rotten. My house is still standing."

The spring wind knocked over two walls. The room in Stasha's house turned into a pile of rubble. In the summer, nettles and thistles appeared in Stasha's flowerbed. In between them, colorful anemones and peonies blossomed desperately. There was also the smell of wild strawberries. Pavel was amazed by how quickly destruction and decay

progressed. It was as though the building of houses was against all of nature, the sky, and the Earth, as though setting up walls, arranging stones one after another all went against the stream of time. He was terrified by this thought. On the television, the anthem died out, and the screen went blank. Pavel turned on all the lights and opened the cupboards.

He saw the perfectly folded piles of bed linens, tablecloths, and towels. He touched their edges, and suddenly he missed Misha with his entire body. So he took out a pile of pillowcases and nestled his face in them. They smelled of soap, cleanness, order, like Misha, like the world, the way it was long ago. He began taking everything out of the cupboards: his and Misha's clothes, piles of cotton undershirts, long johns, bags of socks, Misha's underwear, her slips that he knew so well, stockings, belts and brassieres, her blouses and sweaters. He took his suits from their hangers (many of which, the ones with the crumpled arms, were from the war), trousers with belts strung through the loops, shirts with stiff collars, dresses and skirts. For a long time, he looked over one of Misha's gray woolen suits, and remembered that he had bought the material, and then took it to a tailor. Misha had wanted a wide lapel and tight pockets. From the top shelf he took down some hats and scarves. From the bottom he got out some purses. He plunged his hands into their cool, smooth insides, as though he were gutting a dead animal. On the floor a pile of things he had thrown about chaotically began to grow. He thought that he should give it all to the children. But Adelka had gone. So had Vitek. He did not even know where they were. But then the idea came to him that clothes are only given out after someone dies, and after all, he was still alive.

"I'm alive, and I don't feel that bad. I'll make it," he said to himself, and immediately he got out the violins that had not been used for a long time.

He took them outside onto the steps, and began playing, first *Last Sunday*, then *The Mountains of Manchuria.* Moths began flying around the lamp and circling over his head, a moving halo full of wings and antennae. He played until the dusty, stiff strings began breaking, one after another.

The Time of Izydor

When Pavel moved Izydor into the old people's home, he tried to explain precisely the entire situation to the nun who was receiving him.

"He may not be that old, but he is sick, and impaired as well. Even though I'm a health inspector," Pavel stressed the word "inspector," "and I do know a few things, I can't be sure that I'd be able to care for him."

Izydor willingly assented to the move. From the home he would be closer to the cemetery where his mother, father, and now Misha were all buried. He was happy that Pavel had not been able to finish the mausoleum, and that Misha was buried next to their parents. Every day, after breakfast, he would get dressed and go sit next to them.

But in an old people's home, time flows differently than anywhere else. Its stream is narrower. From month to month, Izydor lost his strength, until finally he stopped visiting the graves.

"Maybe I'm sick," he told Sister Aniela, who looked after him. "Maybe I'm dying."

"I am old," he repeated stubbornly.

He was disappointed. He thought that old age would open that third eye, with which one could see through everything, and permitted one to understand how the world

worked. But nothing was made clearer. His bones just hurt, and he could not sleep. No one visited him, neither dead nor living. At night, he would sometimes see his pictures, Ruta, the way he remembered her, geometric visions, empty spaces, and inside them, angular and oval cylindrical figures. These pictures began to seem faded and blurred more and more often, and the figures seemed twisted and bland, as though they were aging with him.

He no longer had the strength to busy himself with his tables. He would drag himself out of bed and wander about the building so he could look at his four sides of the world. This would occupy him for the whole day. The old people's home was not built properly as it did not have a window to the north, as though its builders had tried to deny that fourth, darkest part of the world to keep from ruining the old people's mood. So Izydor had to go out onto the balcony and lean out over the railing. Then, from behind the corner of the building, he could see the dark unending forest and the ribbon of the highway. The winter completely denied him a view of the north. The balcony was closed. He would sit in an armchair in the so-called common room, where the television would ceaselessly murmur. Izydor tried to forget about the north.

He taught himself how to forget, and the forgetting brought him some relief, and it was easier than he had ever expected. It was enough not to think about the forests for one day, about the river, about his Mama and Misha combing their chestnut hair. It was enough not to think about home and the attic with four windows. And on the second day the pictures were even paler and more faded.

Finally, Izydor could not even walk. His bones and joints, despite all the antibiotics and radiation therapy, stiffened and prohibited any movement. They lay him in a bed in isolation, and there he slowly died.

Death was a systematic decaying process of what was Izydor. It was a cumulative, irreversible process, self-developing, and amazingly effective. Like erasing unneeded information in the computer the staff used to keep track of the home's bills.

First his ideas began to disappear, the thoughts and abstract concepts that Izydor had worked hard to learn through life. With a bang the quadruplicities disappeared:

Line	Square	Triangle	Circle
Addition	Subtraction	Multiplication	Division
Sound	Word	Picture	Symbol
Mercy	Beauty	Strength	Domination
Ethics	Metaphysics	Epistemology	Ontology
Space	Past	Present	Future
Width	Length	Height	Time
Left	Up	Right	Down
War	Suffering	Guilt	Death
Root	Stalk	Flour	Fruit
Sour	Sweet	Bitter	Salty
Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn
And finally:			
West	North	East	South

Then his favorite places faded, then the faces of his loved ones, and finally everyone succumbed to the forgetting. Izydor lost all his feelings – some old emotion (when Misha gave birth to her first child), some regret (when Ruta left), joy (when a letter came from her), certainty (when he was hunting for the quadruplicities), fear (when the Germans had shot at him and Ivan Mukta), pride (when he had gotten money from the post office), and many, many others. Finally, at the very end, when Sister Aniela said: "He's dead," those spaces that Izydor had inside himself, spaces neither Earthly nor Heavenly, curled up, fell apart into tiny pieces, and collapsed and disappeared forever. It was a picture of destruction more terrible than anything else – than war, than fires, than exploding stars or imploding black holes.

Then Kloska appeared at the old people's home.

"You're too late. He died," Sister Aniela told her.

Kloska did not answer. She sat beside Izydor's bed. She touched his neck. Izydor's body no longer breathed, his heart was no longer beating inside it, but it was still warm. Kloska leaned over Izydor and said into his ear:

"Go, and don't stop in any of the worlds. And don't be tempted to return."

She sat beside Izydor's body until they took it away. Then she stayed by his bed the entire night, the entire day, mumbling the whole time. She went only after she was certain that Izydor had left forever.

The Time of the Game

God has aged. In the Eighth World God is already old. His mind grows weaker and weaker and is full of holes. The Word has

become gibberish. So has the world, which came into being from the Thought and the Word. The sky cracks like a dried up tree. The Earth has faded in places and now it crumbles into pieces beneath the feet of animals and people. The corners of the world are becoming frayed, turning to dust.

God wanted to be perfect and so stopped. What does not move stays in place. What stays in place falls apart.

"Nothing comes out of creating worlds," thinks God. "Creating worlds leads to nothing, nothing happens, nothing expands, nothing changes. It is futile."

For God, death does not exist, though sometimes God would like to die, the way people die, the people he trapped inside worlds and tangled within time. Sometimes people's spirits slip out and disappear from his all-seeing eye. This is when God yearns the most, because he knows that outside of him there exists an unchanging order, connecting what does change into a single pattern. And within this order, which even includes God, everything that seems fleeting and spread out over time begins to exist simultaneously and eternally, outside of time.

The Time of Adelka

Adelka got off the Kielce bus on the Highway and had the feeling that she had just woken up. She felt that she had been asleep, dreaming about her life in some town,

with some people, amid confused and vague events. She shook her head, and saw the forest road to Longago in front of her, the linden trees along both its sides, and the dark wall of Wodenica. Everything was in its place.

She stopped and straightened her bag around her shoulder. She looked at her Italian shoes and her camel's hair coat. She could see that she looked beautiful, as though she were in a fashion magazine, from a big city. She began walking, balancing herself on her high heels.

When she got out of the forest, she was struck by the enormity of the sky that had suddenly unveiled itself. She had forgotten that the sky could be so big, as if different, uknown worlds were housed within it. She had never seen such a sky in Kielce.

She saw the roof of her home. She could not believe her eyes when she saw how big the lilac bush had grown. When she came closer, her heart froze for a moment. Her Aunt Parrot's house was not there. There was only bare sky in the place where it used to stand.

Adelka opened the gate and stood in front of her house. The doors and windows were closed. She went to the back yard. It was overgrown with grass. Small miniature hens, colorful as peacocks, ran up to her. Suddenly it came to her that her father and Izydor must have died, that no one had phoned her, and now she had come to an empty house, in her Italian heels and her coat from "Telemina's."

She put down her suitcase, smoked a cigarette, and then walked through the orchard where her aunt's house had once stood.

"So you smoke now?" she heard suddenly.

She instinctively threw away her cigarette and felt the old, childish fear in her throat that came with standing in front of her father. She lifted her eyes and saw him. He was sitting on a kitchen stool, in the middle of a pile of rubble that was once his sister's home.

"What are you doing here, father?" she asked.

"I'm looking at the house."

She did not know what to say. They looked at each other in silence.

She could see that he had not shaved for at least a week. His stubble was completely white now, as though a frost had settled on his face. She noticed that he had aged a lot over the years.

"Have I changed?" she asked.

"You've aged," he answered, turning his gaze towards the house. "Like everyone."

"What happened, Papa? Where is uncle Izydor? Is there no one to help you?"

"Everyone is demanding money from me. They want to take the house. Like I'm already dead. I'm still alive though. Why didn't you come for your mother's funeral?"

Adelka's hands longed for a cigarette.

"I only came so I could tell you that I'm getting along all right. I finished my studies. I'm working now. My daughter's already a big girl."

"Why didn't you have a son?"

Once again she felt the familiar knot in her throat. She had the feeling that she had woken up a second time. Kielce did not exist. There were no Italian heels. No

camel's hair coat. Time was sliding down like an eroded riverbank and was trying to take them with it into the future.

"Because I didn't," she said.

"You all have girls. Antos has two. Vitek has one. The twins have one each. And now you. I remember everything. I count everything meticulously. And I still don't have a grandson. You've all disappointed me."

She took another cigarette out of her pocket and began smoking it.

Her father watched the match flame.

"What about your husband?" he asked

With some relief, Adelka inhaled then blew out a cloud of smoke.

"I don't have a husband.

"He left you?" he asked.

She turned around and started towards the house.

"Wait. The house is locked. There are thieves all over here and all kinds of lay-abouts."

He followed her slowly. He took a bunch of keys out of his pocket. She watched as he opened the first lock, then the second, then third. His hands were shaking. With surprise she noticed that she was taller than he was.

She entered the kitchen before him and instantly smelled the familiar fragrance of the cool oven and burned milk. She inhaled it like cigarette smoke.

There were dirty plates sitting on the table with flies lazily crawling over them. The sun was drawing figures through the curtains onto the tablecloth.

"Papa, where is Izydor?"

"I put him in the retirement home in Jeszkotle. He was already old and feeble. He finally died. We're all waiting for the same thing."

She shoved a pile of clothes off a chair and sat down. She wanted to cry. Lumps of dirt and dried grass were stuck to her high heels.

"There's no reason to feel sorry for him. They made sure he was taken care of and fed. He had it better than me. I have to mind everything, look after the details."

She stood up and went to the front room. He limped after her clumsily, keeping his eyes on her. On the table, she saw a heap of grayed clothing, undershirts, long johns, and underwear. A small sponge and wooden handled rubber stamp were lying on a newspaper. She took a pair of long johns and read the faint ink print: "Pavel Boski, Inspector."

"They steal," he said. "They even take long johns off the laundry line."

"Papa, I'll stay here with you for a little while. I'll clean up for you. I'll bake a cake." Adelka took off her coat and hung it over the back of a chair.

"Leave it." Pavel's voice sounded unexpectedly sharp. "I don't want somebody here to rule me. I'm getting along just fine."

She went to the yard for her suitcase, and then lay some presents down on the dirty table. A cream colored tie for her father, a box of chocolates and cologne for Izydor. She held a picture of her daughter in her hand for a moment.

"This is my daughter. Do you want to see?"

He took the photo and glanced at the picture.

"She's not similar to any of us. How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"What have you been doing this whole time?"

She took a deep breath of air because it seemed to her that there was a lot to talk about, but suddenly her head was empty.

Pavel quietly took the presents and put them in the cupboard in the living room. She heard his keys jingle as they turned in the locks that had been forced into the oaken cupboard doors. She looked around the kitchen and recognized things she had forgotten. On the rack by the tiled stove sat the plate with the second bottom, where one poured hot water to keep the soup from getting cold. On the shelf stood the porcelain jars with blue lettering: flour, rice, porridge, sugar. Ever since she could remember the jar with sugar had been cracked. Above the door to the living room hung a reproduction of a painting of Our Lady of Jeszkotle. Her beautiful hands displayed a smooth cleavage with a coquettish gesture, but where her breasts should have been there was instead a small piece of bloody meat, her heart. Finally, Adelka's gaze came to rest on her mother's coffee mill with the porcelain handle and neat drawer. From the living room she could hear the clang of the keys opening the cupboard locks. She hesitated for a moment, then quickly took the coffee mill from the shelf and hid it in her suitcase.

"You came back too late," said her father from the doorway. "Everything has finished. It's a time for dying."

He laughed as though he had just told a great joke. She could see that there was nothing left of his once beautiful white teeth. They sat in silence. Adelka's eyes wandered over the tablecloth pattern, stopping at the jars of current juice, in which some flies had fallen.

"I could stay." she whispered. Ash from her cigarette fell on her skirt.

Pavel turned his face to the window and looked at the orchard through the dirty glass.

"I don't need anything anymore. I'm not afraid of anything now."

She understood what he had wanted to say. She stood and slowly put on her coat. She kissed him awkwardly on both gray stubbled cheeks. She thought that he would walk her to the gate, but he immediately began walking to the pile of ruins where his stool was still standing.

She got onto the Highway, only then realizing that it had been paved with asphalt. The linden trees seemed smaller to her. A light breeze blew a few leaves from their branches, falling into the tall grass of Stasha Parrot's field.

At Wodenica she cleaned her high heels with a tissue and fixed her hair. She had to wait for the bus for about an hour. When it came, she was the only passenger. She opened her suitcase, took out the coffee mill, and began slowly turning the small crank. The driver looked at her strangely in the mirror.

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